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Tales of the Human Kind

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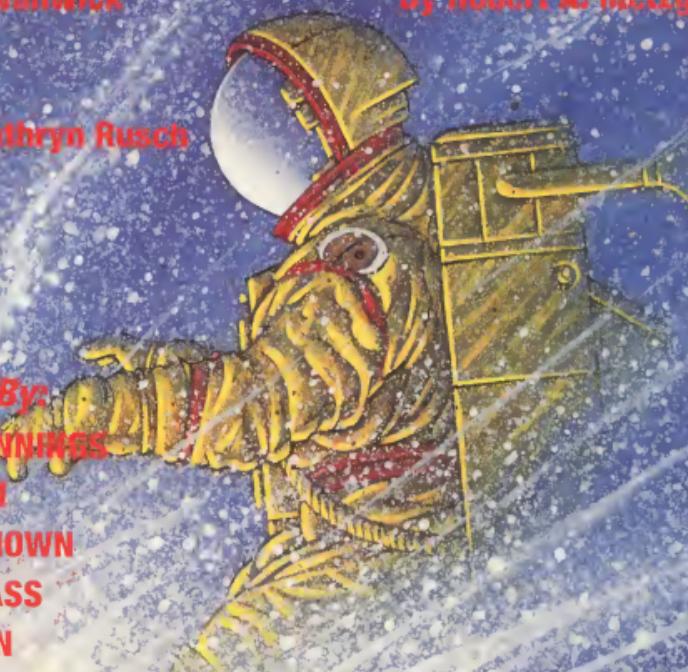
PHILLIP C. JENNINGS

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09

BRIAN
©90

Jet-Dancer

by James C. Glass

Art by Cortney Skinner

Lyrae waited in the darkness of the tiny backstage, heart pounding as the din went on and on. Nan had worked the crowd into a frenzy with a herky-jerky routine that was all sex and no art, but the men all came back for it again and again and showered the heavy-breasted veteran with silver and gold. Lyrae envied the older woman's body, but not the crude jet harness in her act or the pawing by the crowd. Only a moment before, she'd heard Nan yell, then the laughter of men at her curses. A piece of meat on display, without dignity or respect, surrounded by sweating, grunting cobalt miners who would spend a week's pay in an evening for watered-down drinks and a few looks at female flesh. Touching cost extra, but nobody touched Lyrae Jellico; nobody ever touched a Jet-Dancer, because if he did, a lifetime of lonely weekends in the barracks on some miserable asteroid was in his future. Jet-Dancer meant class, even if it was on the sleaziest wheel sunward of the belt and the closest she'd probably get to her dream. What would mother say now, Jellico, the company-owned woman with all the ambitions for her little girl, the dried-up woman who'd worked her fingers bloody in the ore separators and died a crummy death from breathing too much rock because her husband was crushed in a mine collapse that shouldn't have happened? Lyrae had buried them side by side, then used what they'd died for to come to the Anaconda-Toshiro wheel because it was as far as she could afford to go from Hanson Beta, and the mines, and the constant smell of rock dust.

Now she was a Jet-Dancer — with dreams of more.

Nate floated up to her and reached through the nozzle web to touch her on the cheek. She smiled, and brushed his fingers with her lips.

"Break a leg, angel," he said, grinning, one withered arm dangling limply at his side. Best one-handed console player in the business, he liked to say. And lover, she'd tell him, so he'd laugh that silly little laugh of his. But love Nate Bracken she did, and they had been together for six years.

"Crowd sounds rough tonight. I heard Nan yell a minute ago."

"She gets what she asks for," said Nate, and there was no sympathy in his voice. Just as he said it there was another roar from the crowd, and a sweaty, huge-breasted woman drifted backstage under the red light, grabbed a handhold there, and twisted grotesquely to check a portion of skin on one thigh. She pushed off again and sailed towards them, grimacing.

"Sons of bitches," growled the big woman, and then she saw Lyrae. "Your turn, sweets, but watch the red beard in the front row. Bastard tried to bite me!" Not waiting for an answer, she floated past them on two nozzles, like a

rock freighter.

Lyrae twisted in the lacy titanium harness, adjusting a strut that was not quite radial and tended to give her an awkward precession she found distracting. Nate watched a while, then said, "Let's speed it up a little tonight. I'm ready to crash."

"Play me, babe," she said, and then he was gone in the darkness. She floated to the wings at stage right and grabbed a rung with one finger, the delicate web of titanium surrounding her giving the wall a gentle bump. In a moment she felt the first stirring of the tiny jets scattered throughout the web. She released her handhold and relaxed as Nate turned her left, right, upside down, and back again, checking each nozzle in turn, and then she was upright and steady, all jets hissing softly. A radiating spray of laser light exploded before her like a giant rose opening, and Nate's rendition of Sidel's "Summer Squall" filled the smoky room with musical wind. He brought her straight out, slowly, bare arms back, face tilted upwards, in leaping fawn position, and except for the synthesizer you could have heard a single cube of ice tinkle against a glass if there had been one there to do it. And then she was a whirlwind, fragile yet full of life, dashing to and fro across the stage, pausing once or twice to gesture at a darkened face and smile, lifting off to soar once again.

Now a leaf, falling from a tree, touching the stage with a tiny foot, then swirling away and out over the heads of the audience. Lyrae waited for someone to grab her, but nobody did, and she wasn't surprised. She smelled sweat and whiskey and semen. Someone beating off in a dark corner of the room. Suddenly, it sickened her. She growled softly into her throat mike, "Nate? Get me out of here — now!"

"You okay, darlin'? We're nearly there."

"I want off, Nate, or I'm gonna be sick."

"Okay, okay, we're there anyway. Comin' down...gesture...arms in...slowly...head back...and fade..."

The stage was dark as she floated to the wings and found the first handhold. She latched up the web and wriggled free as the applause began, tentative and soft at first, then thunderous, and the men were calling her name. Tears bubbled up in her eyes as she clawed her way to the dressing room, sobbing. The door slammed behind her, and when Nate arrived a few minutes later she was strapped in a lounge chair, sucking on a white wine cooler and watching one of the Marinto tapes in her library. He came up behind her and gently kneaded the muscles in the back of her neck.

"Again Lucille," said Nate, watching the tape with her.

Lyrae wiped her eyes clear again. "It's what I want to do, Nate. It's what I'm going to do."



SKINNER



C. BURKE
2001

"No ballet in zero-g, Lyrae. Real gravity without coriolis is a must for the dance-form, and we just don't have that here."

"Then I'll go where I can get it. Marinto is in Paris again for the off-season. Her classes begin in two weeks."

"You couldn't be ready in two years, Lyrae. Come on, we've had this conversation before. Your whole life has been spent at under six-tenths gee. Look at Lucille and then yourself. Look at that power! In one gee, Lyrae! She's four feet off the floor! What do you weigh now, eighty pounds? That woman could carry you around under one arm. Lyrae, the gravity could kill you. You're a spacer, and you always will be. Adapt your dance to it. I can write new music, scale up the jets for maybe a tenth gee. Let me talk to the company board about a studio closer to the ring. Work up to it, and..."

"I've got a ticket for the Thursday shuttle, Nate!" She felt his surprise through his one good hand working on her neck.

"I'm going back to Terra for one year. I've got to try. The life I'm living here will kill me faster than gravity, and I've got to get out!"

Nate's hand worked furiously at the back of her neck. "You know what I think? I think this all is just an excuse. You're leaving me, is what you're doing. The limp arm getting to you, Lyrae?"

"Stop it, Nate. It has nothing to do with you."

"Then how can you up and leave for a year? I thought we had this all talked out."

"We did. And I've decided to go. Easy on the neck, please. That's hurting now."

Nate jerked his hand away from her. "I can't even touch you. Why don't you just tell me who it is so I can be a good sport?"

"Oh, God, that's juvenile. Stop it. You do all the creative work out there. You play me, and I pose for you, your fingers fly over the jet console while I stay locked in a titanium cage, spinning at your command. Don't you understand, Nate? I want to dance. I want to feel the music come up through my feet, telling my body what to do. I want to feel the effort and the sweat and my heart pounding with the beat. You can't do that for me. Nobody can."

Nate was quiet for a moment, regarding her solemnly, eyes moist, and then he said in a quavering voice, "You'll never come back if you go to Terra now. You'll find someone else, and that'll be the end of us — the end of me."

His eyes told her he believed it. She pushed off from the lounge chair and put her arms around his neck, kissing him soft, then hard as they floated lazily towards the closed door, bouncing off it. "Does that feel like I won't come back to you? Write new music for me, Nate. Write some of that —" and she turned her head towards the monitor in time to watch Lucille Marinto soar from the stage in a flying grand jeté that for an instant seemed to defy the very force that gave energy to her dance. Lyrae looked at Nate close up, her eyes glittering.

"I want to do that," she said.

And so the following Thursday she kissed him good-bye and climbed excitedly onto the rehab shuttle running to earth.

The look on his face at that moment haunted her continuously for a month.

And the entire year on the planet Earth was a living

hell.

It was a Friday, and Lyrae felt if she had to dance even one more hour she would surely die. Her mind wandered for the blink of an eye, but it was enough. In a tempo transition stage left she ended a full beat behind and was rudely jostled out of the way by a girl thirty pounds heavier than she. She stumbled, nearly falling, and the group was suddenly in chaos. The music stopped sharply, silence punctuated here and there by tittering as Lucille stalked towards her with death in her black eyes. She came close, hot breath smelling of garlic, voice a snarl. Lyrae stood submissively before her teacher, eyes downcast, face flushed.

"Tell me, little girl. Is there even a remote possibility that you will someday find your center? Or perhaps that is too much to ask. Can you find your feet?"

More tittering. Lyrae felt a tear work its way over a cheekbone. "I'm sorry, I'm a little tired."

Somebody groaned. "QUIET," yelled Lucille Marinto. "We're all tired here, but we will work at this piece until it is correct, and when you are stumbling around it is not correct. Only when you get it right can we all go home, and that goes for all of you! Now FOCUS!"

Lucille stalked back to the recorder, and Lyrae stared at the floor, wanting badly to die. "From the same place, and hopefully for the last time today. Positions. And THINK!"

Lyrae thought, and did it right, but when class ended a few minutes later, and Paul Duchat came towards her with that let-me-help-you look in his eyes, she stuffed her clothes in a bag and fled from the rehearsal hall into foggy Paris streets, winding her way quickly home in gloom because in this kind of weather a favorite pastime of the local hoodlums was to ride past you on their air scooters and slam you to the ground by your hair. Near the Louvre, where she lived, the city had become decrepit. The Communist government had de-emphasized all visual arts, and when the Eiffel Tower collapsed in the air crash of 2041 they had left the rubble pile in place as a monument to capitalistic waste and stupidity. Her apartment was an attic in a nineteenth-century brick building, four flights up. She dragged herself up the stairs and flopped on the bed for a good cry in the dark before going back to the main floor, where there was a mail terminal. The weasel-like man at the front desk eyed her suspiciously when she logged in, as if she were up to something illegal. She put a roll of credit coins on the console in front of her, glanced over a shoulder to check the weasel, then began to type her message.

NATE BRACKEN
ZONE FIVE, ANACONDA-TOSHIRO STATION
FOUR, LEVEL NINE
NINETEEN HUNDRED HOURS, AUGUST 30, 2137
MY DARLING,
I'M LONELY, TIRED, MISERABLE, AND I'VE HAD
A TERRIBLE DAY. LUCILLE YELLED AT ME CON-
STANTLY, BUT I'M GETTING BETTER, AND
STRONGER. THE OTHER GIRLS ARE SO BIG. I
NEVER GUESSED. I MISS YOU, AND I LOVE YOU SO
MUCH. WRITE MUSIC FOR ME, AND I'LL BE HOME

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A crazy alien

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Rumors, Rumblings, and Loose Ends

It's not my fault, honest! The average time between writing these columns and seeing them in print is about six months. That means the studios have a six-month period in which to bedevil me with changes. In six months the studios can change the format, star, or title of the series, or, as with the ill-fated *Triangle* series, a studio can change format and star, and then cancel a series. Most of the time I catch the changes, but some errors do creep in — Bruce Willis, not Arnold Schwarzenegger, is slated to play *Sgt. Rock*. I try to keep these minor indiscretions to a minimum. It's not my fault, honest!

Once again, it's time to baffle you with incredible sleight of hand, wondrous feats of telepathy, and magnificent soothsaying powers to bring you the fall season and upcoming movies.

Television

With the unprecedented success of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and the predicted summer bonanza for *Dick Tracy*, the resurgence of interest in film adaptations of comic book characters for both small and big screens (after the debacles of *Supergirl*, *Howard the Duck*, *Superman IV*, and *Sheena*) seems determinedly in full thrust.

In the live-action department, there is interest in DC's *Human Target* and Marvel's *She-Hulk*, *X-Men*, and *Spiderman*, and another attempt at a *Dr. Strange* movie-of-the-week. A pilot for a new *Dr. Strange* was written over a year ago by the talented television and mystery writer Robert Crais. Last I heard, it was doing what the majority of pilots do — sitting on the shelf, collecting dust.

Animated heroes being considered include *Power Pack* for NBC, *The*

Flash (CBS), *Justice League* (NBC), *Thor*, *Time Beavers*, *The Fish Police*, and a new series called *Unlimited Powers* featuring the characters of Dr. Occult, Blok, Green Arrow's daughter, and a new Flash.

In September, Ted Turner and TBS premier a children's animated series called *Captain Planet and the Planeteers*. The series, designed to bring attention to the ecological problems of the Earth, will feature the vocal talents of LeVar Burton, Whoopi Goldberg, and Richard Gere.

The Real Ghostbusters is returning this fall with three episodes written by *Twilight Zone*'s Joe Straczynski. They are a Lovecraft pastiche, "Russian About"; a Haunting of Heck House"; and, for diehard *Ghostbusters* enthusiasts, a clever episode called "Janine, You've Changed," explaining why Janine's outward appearance changed from funky in the original shows to conservative in the later series. Also being written by Straczynski is a full-length science-fiction animated feature with a working title of *Mr. Freeze*.

Warner Bros. projects in the pipeline include *The Thief and the Cobbler*, a full-length *Arabian Nights* tale; *Family Dog*, a CBS series based on an episode of *Amazing Stories*; a syndicated *Gremlins* series; and *Tiny Toon Adventures*, featuring the characters of Babs and Buster Bunny, Hamton, Elmyra, Plucky Duck, Montana Max, and Dizzy Devil. These cute Warner Bros. characters will premiere with a CBS special followed by 65 half-hour shows. The executive producer of the series is Steven Spielberg.

ABC has firm commitments on three new animated series: *The Wizard of Oz* from DIC Enterprises, *New Kids on the Block*, and *Little*

Rosey, which, I kid you not, is about the adventures of a ten-year-old Roseanne Barr. *Little Rosey* is being produced by Nelvana in association with Little Rosey Productions, a new company formed by Barr which will oversee the show and develop a toy line.

Tentatively scheduled in September is the start of 65 half-hour animated *Peter Pan* shows. (See the full fall morning schedule on the next page.)

Back to real life!

The USA Network is filming a movie-of-the-week with Heather Locklear about the life of Edgar Allan Poe, called *The Tell-Tale House*. On the subject of Poe, Harlan Ellison is dramatizing two Poe stories, *The Cask of Amontillado* and *The Tell-Tale Heart*, for Think Entertainment's *Nightmare Classics* series, to be seen on Showtime. Other stories for the one-hour show include *Afterward* by Edith Wharton and *They* by Rudyard Kipling.

Proving you're never too long in the tooth is the return of *Dark Shadows* on NBC. This time, the vampire-cursed Barnabas is played by British actor Ben Cross, with fellow Brit Jean Simmons as Elizabeth Collins Stoddard. Dan Curtis is directing and writing the show.

In the early stages of development is a new one-man anthology show. Developed and hosted by Roger Corman, the series is not surprisingly titled *Roger Corman's House of Usher*.

Here are updates on the Stephen King book-to-screen saga: You can add the King/Peter Straub book *The Talisman* to the mini-series lineup. As of press time, no air date has been set for the series.

Granada television in England is



Playing *Ghosties*

Fall's Saturday AM TV

Courtesy of the Animation Writers of America and the AWA President Sheryl Scarborough, here is the Saturday morning schedule for the 1990-91 season:

8:00 CBS: Jim Henson's *Muppet Babies* [Henson/Marvel]
NBC: *Camp Candy* [DIC]
ABC: *New Adventures of Winnie the Pooh* [Disney]
8:30 CBS: Jim Henson's *Muppet Babies* (cont.)
NBC: *Captain N* and *Super Mario Brothers 3* [DIC]
ABC: *The Wizard of Oz* [DIC]
9:00 CBS: *Garfield and Friends* [United Media/Film Roman/Paws]
NBC: *Captain N* (cont.)
ABC: *Slimer and the Real Ghostbusters* [DIC]
9:30 CBS: *Garfield and Friends* (cont.)
NBC: *Rick Moranis in Gravedale High* [Hanna-Barbera]
ABC: *Ghostbusters* (cont.)
10:00 CBS: *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* [Murakami-Wolf-Swenson]
NBC: *Kid'N'Play* [Saban]
ABC: *Beetlejuice* [DIC]
10:30 CBS: *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (cont.)
NBC: *Chipmunks Go to the Movies* [Bagdasarian/DIC]
ABC: *New Kids on the Block* [DIC]
11:00 CBS: *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure* [H-B/Orion]
NBC: *Saved by the Bell* [Engel/NBC]
ABC: *Bugs Bunny and Tweety Show* [Warner]
11:30 CBS: *Pee-wee's Playhouse*
NBC: *The Boys Next Door* [NBC Prods.]
ABC: *Bugs Bunny* (cont.)
NOON CBS: *Dink, the Little Dinosaur* [Ruby-Spears]
NBC: *Saturday Videos* [Fenny's Films/NBC]
ABC: *Little Rosey* [Nelvana]
12:30 CBS: *CBS Storybreak* [CBS]
NBC: *Inside Stuff* [NBA]
ABC: *A Pup Named Scooby-Doo* [Hanna-Barbera]

Fox Children's Network (schedule not set)

- Zazoo U [Film Roman]
- Tom and Jerry's Kids [H-B]
- Attack of the Killer Tomatoes [Marvel]
- Bobby's World [Film Roman]
- Pig Out [Ruby-Spears]
- Fun House [Warner Bros.]

starting production on six new *Sherlock Holmes* stories starring Jeremy Brett. As yet, the Conan Doyle stories for this series have not been chosen.

In the category of "vague rumors in the atmosphere" are whispers of a *Sherlock Holmes* movie (there have also been rumblings of bringing the original English stage adaptation of *The Secret of Sherlock Holmes* with Jeremy Brett and Edward Hardwicke to Los Angeles) and a TV version of Philip K. Dick's short story "Beyond Lies the Web."

Universal has five new shows for syndication and the USA network: *Swamp Thing*, with Joe (Outer Limits) Stefano as the producer; *Shades of LA*, a comedy-detective series; *Man of a Thousand Faces*, a show with a *Raiders of the Lost Ark* flavor to it; *They Came from Outer Space*; and *She-Wolf of London*, created by Mick Garris and described as a werewolf show with a twist.

Two shows that have been axed from the fall schedule are *Friday the 13th* and *War of the Worlds*, while V the miniseries has been postponed until 1991.

Movies

Solarbabies has spawned another ball-bearing movie. *Prayer of the Rollerboys* stars Corey (*Lost Boys*) Haim as the hero Griffin, who must battle the Rollerboys, "a gang of beautiful, young white supremacists, reigning terror on Rollerblade skates" to save his family and Los Angeles.

Keeping in the same vein, production will start in September on Cannon's *To The Death*, with Marjoe Gortner directing LaToya Jackson as a gladiator 300 years in the future.

Tim (*Batman*) Burton is producing and directing *Edward Scissorhands*, about a man with shears instead of fingers (Johnny Depp plays the eponymous hero), and has commitments to *Beetlejuice II*, with Michael Keaton, and possibly to *Pet People*, in which pets change into humans and play marriage counselors for their divorcing owners.

The comic/celluloid translation continues with a live-action version of Lee Falk's *Mandrake the Magician* from King Features Entertainment and the Cecchi Gori group of Italy. In a recent issue of *Central City News* was a report on a *Fantastic Four* feature directed by Bernard (*The Never Ending Story*) Eichenger. The Fantas-

tic Four in this case will be Mr. Fantastic, The Invisible Woman, The Human Torch, and either The Thing or She-Hulk.

Dave Stevens's *Rocketeer* movie will have a projected release of summer 1991 from the Disney studios.

At the pre-production stage is Moebius's *Airtight Garage*. This full-length animated feature is a joint US-Soviet (Soyuzmultfilm) venture with a screenplay by writer Randy Lofcier. Due to the complexity of the project, release is scheduled for 1992.

Three classics from the horror masters are being translated from book to screen: *The Thing on the Doorstep* by H.P. Lovecraft; Poe's *Haunting Fear*, with Jan-Michael Vincent and Karen Black; and in pre-production, H.G. Wells's *The Invisible Man*, screenplay by George R.R. Martin.

Hot trends at the moment are still *Phantom of the Opera* and Stephen King. Andrew Lloyd Webber and Steven Spielberg join forces to bring us *The Phantom of the Opera: The Musical* with Michael Crawford and Sarah Brightman. Spielberg and Amblin Entertainment are also bringing you the cast of a million legs in *Arachnophobia*, a.k.a. *Along Came a Spider*, with Jeff Daniels and John Goodman. And, from the King catalogue, you can add *Misery*, starring James Caan, with a script by William (The *Princess Bride*) Goldman, and *Graveyard Shift*, from the *Night Shift* collection.

This summer (release date July 27), Patrick Swayze, Demi Moore, and Whoopi Goldberg star in *Ghost*. Swayze plays a ghost stranded in New York City who, with the help of psychic Whoopi Goldberg, must save the life of the woman he loves.

For the October-November months, Disney is offering three major animated releases. The restored version of *Fantasia* will be in the theaters in October. This is the 50th anniversary celebration of *Fantasia* with Disney going back to the original musical direction of Leopold Stokowski, as well as restoring, frame by frame, the original nitrate negative. In November the second *Rescuers* movie, *The Rescuers Down Under*, can be seen on a double bill with a new 23-minute Mickey Mouse featurette, *The Prince and the Pauper*.

Here's some sequel news. It seems that budding director Arnold Schwar-

zenegger is interested in repeating two of the films that made him a star with *Twins II* and *Terminator II*. Schwarzenegger will reprise his role as the no-nonsense cyborg. Standing in for Schwarzenegger in *Predator II* is Danny (Lethal Weapon) Glover, with Gary Busey, Ruben Blades, Maria Conchita Alonso, and, suiting up again, Kevin Peter Hall. Christmas opens another *Police Squad* file with Leslie Nielsen's deadpan Lt. Frank Drebin causing even more chaos in *The Naked Gun II: Fantastic Voyage II*, based on the novel by Isaac Asimov, is in the works for probable motion picture release. And keep an eye out for *The Outsider: Watchers II*, a loose sequel to the first *Watchers*, based on the Dean Koontz novel.

William Shatner is back starring



Ghosting along

and directing a multitude of extras in *Kingdom of the Spiders II*. Speaking of *Star Trek* ... number 6 looks iffy at best. It seems the "Star Fleet Academy" script is dead. One of the rumors is that Gene Roddenberry may be asked to write a replacement script, but nothing is definite yet. Nichelle Nichols, on a recent *Hour 25* radio show, stated she would love to do a third movie but could see the reins being handed over to a different cast. *Trek* refugee Leonard Nimoy is busy as the director of a new film, as yet untitled, with Gene Wilder, Christine Lahti, Mary Stuart Masterson, and Farrah Fawcett.

The question is who's in and who's out for *Aliens III*. Director Renny Harlin is out, director Vincent Ward is in. Writers William Gibson and David N. Twohy are out, while writer John Fasano is in. It seems director #2 threw out writer #2's script; the producers then brought in writer #3 who is writing a new script based on director #2's idea. Even after this fast shuffle, the studio is hoping to start filming in September.

Shooting has been completed in Argentina on *Highlander: The Quickening*, with Christopher Lambert and Sean Connery. Another returning twosome is Bryan Brown and Brian Dennehy in *F/X 2*. And because you begged for it, those party dudes are back in *Subhumanoid Meltdown: Class of Nuke 'Em High, Part II*.

Sequels in various stages of production include *Trancers II*, with Tim Thomerson as Jack Deth; *Freddy's Dead*, "the final chapter in the *Nightmare on Elm Street* saga"; *Moontrap II: The Pyramids of Mars* (Moontrap starred *Star Trek*'s Walter Koenig); *The Toxic Avenger III: The Last Temptation of Toxic*; *Beastmaster II: The Portal of Time*, with Marc Singer; and *Scanners III: The Takeover* (*Scanners II* will be released this fall).

Not really a sequel, but, in this instance, more of the same drivel is *Majestic*, which reunites author Whitley Strieber and director Phillippe Mora for more of this *Communion* nonsense.

In the B Feature corner, Phoenix Distributors, a company that specializes in the video distribution of "B" movies, has announced the release of their newest acquisition, *The Attack of the Killer Refrigerators*. I was going to give a plot synopsis, but I think you get the general idea. And for those of you with a berserk Betty Crocker mentality, you can get killer *hors d'oeuvres* to complement your killer kitchen appliance. Four Square Productions has started work on *Killer Tomatoes Strike Back*.

Finally, this year's Toxic Waste Award goes to *The Suckling* from Suckling Productions. It's that old story of a fetus which is flushed down the toilet, mixes with that ol' green slime, and mutates into a monster with a razor-sharp umbilical cord. It slices, it dices! But wait, there's more! The press release states: "The tension and horror all build toward the grotesquely shocking conclusion of *The Suckling*." You've got to be kidding.

Happy Halloween.

Note: "Protecting Your Writes" (Sept.-Oct. 1989 issue) update — the fee for registering literary materials with the Writers Guild is now \$10 for members and \$20 for nonmembers.

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Survival of the Fittest

By John Gribbin and Marcus Chown

Art by David Brian

When Darwin coined his famous theory concerning evolution by natural selection, he had in mind a different kind of fitness from the benefits we gain from physical exertion.

Don't go too far, Jan." Frances Reese's warning was still ringing in Du Toit's ears as he cut the jet pack and attempted a landfall a kilometer from the cluster of spacecraft. The terrain a hundred meters below was largely hidden, cloaked in mottled shadow, but it was unlikely, in such low gravity, that he would come to grief by dropping blind. Still, there was no sense in taking chances. He peered down into the gloom, trying to make out something as he fell in a long, leisurely arc towards the surface.

He had had to get away, get some precious solitude, and even mother-hen Reese had relented, grudgingly, when he'd told her, in all seriousness, that he was set to explode. It was true; make no mistake. He might have been the most even-tempered and phlegmatic spacer on the long flight out to the Dragon, but intolerable pressure had built up inside him like a head of steam, until he didn't like to think what he might do to any of his crewmates if he didn't crack a release valve, and soon.

Of course, he had known exactly what to expect when he had volunteered for this crazy mission. But, somehow, recognizing intellectually the pitfalls of overcrowding on a long interplanetary flight had not prepared him for the nerve-jangling click of Wenzel's jaw as he munched each and every mouthful, or Finnegan's deathly bleak depressions which infected the rest of the crew like an emotional cancer, or even the innocuous but endless chess games between Xu and Bertorelli — the board with its magnetic pieces always cluttering up the rec room table (why couldn't they play on the computer, for God's sake?) and never leaving enough room for a food tray.

Irritating habits, idiosyncrasies, petty selfishness magnified to enormous proportion: the old, old story. No doubt he, Du Toit, irritated the hell out of half the crew with a dozen microscopic mannerisms. He knew for sure that most of his colleagues took exception to his keep-fit routines. "Training for the Olympics, Jan?" Every time he tried to work out in the limited space available he'd get the same crack from Xu, usually followed by a remark about how humankind had reached the top of the evolutionary tree by intellectual superiority, not brute force. Maybe that was a comfort to someone who stood little more than 150 centimeters high and weighed well under sixty kilos back on Earth. But he'd never seen why being intellectually gifted gave you a license to let your body run to seed, and he didn't care who knew his views.

Perhaps, in a myriad of small ways, he was continually getting his own back. That sadistic thought had helped him to keep sane and maintain his outward cool through all these difficult months. At least he hadn't hit anyone.

Survival of the Fittest

Aboriginal Science Fiction — Sept.-Oct. 1990

which was more than could be said for Jackson. Who would have believed they'd have to transfer meek and mild Jackson from the *Hoyle* to *Aries II* in mid-flight, with all the risks of that maneuver, just to get him away from Saha and prevent the first interplanetary murder?

He felt the metal claws on his boots snag the surface, and flexed his legs to take up the momentum. The Sun was directly overhead, forever at zenith now that the comet was no longer spinning, but it was still too distant and dim to illuminate the surface properly. But some detail was visible close by. Where the ice wasn't streaked with dust it seemed to glow eerily as if from an internal light source, deep down inside. He'd seen the same ghostly effect on Earth, walking across freshly fallen snow on a starry night.

Du Toit turned off his helmet light and felt himself poised between the stars and the faint Sun and the glowing surface of the comet. He seemed to be in a valley, or at least a depression of some kind, cupped in a giant hand carrying him through space. He had to remind himself that this really was a world, with a substantial surface area, with hills and cliffs, mountains and crevasses. It was difficult to reconcile this reality with the image of a tiny speck — for that was all it had been — that he had watched for three months in the *Hoyle*'s 50-centimeter finder.

When he clicked the full beam of his light back on, the cone of illumination lit up a wide cleft in the ice with sheer ice walls towering on both sides of him. The wall to his right must be 50 meters away, but the left-hand wall was just a few strides from him. His gentle landing, floating down almost parallel to the ice face, could so easily have become a tumble down the nearly vertical face. Back home they'd call the feature a kloof. Du Toit's Kloof? How about that? He would talk to Reese on his return to the ships and request that they name it after its discoverer. He had no idea how long the feature would persist in the heat of the Sun once the ice started buckling and boiling off into the vacuum, but it was the nearest he would ever get to immortality.

He began walking parallel with the ice walls — long, looping, comical strides, each of which ended in an awkward maneuver he had yet to perfect, in which he corkscrewed the claws of one boot into the ice to gain purchase for the next stride and to ensure he didn't bounce off into space. All this was unnecessary. He had a jet pack and, if he floated away in the minuscule gravity of the comet, all he had to do was orient the nozzle and trigger a short burn to nudge himself back down to the surface. But that would be cheating. He wanted to walk, or at least practice what laughably passed for walking on this oversized snowball. He had spent too much time these

past few months floating inside a spaceship or tethered to one or another of the vehicles, directing the burns that cancelled the angular momentum of the comet. He wanted at least the pretense of normality, and that was why he was out here, doing silly walks on a chunk of primordial ice between the planets.

In two days time Reese would order the big burn that would change the course of this ponderous iceberg of the vacuum. Only a couple of hours before, they had finished orienting the fusion engines. So Reese had given them all a much-needed forty-eight-hour break from their daily toil. And he had taken a walk in the dark rather than oblivion in his bunk. Sleep wasn't what he needed. No, he needed a breath of fresh air. Metaphorically, of course.

The kloof had tributaries, narrow fissures which swallowed up the light of his helmet beam. Du Toit stopped and peered into one. He could see at least a hundred meters into the crack, which stretched downward into the comet, maybe to its rocky core. He would never know, since a sharp bend interrupted his line of sight. Better watch out for crevasses, he reminded himself. His quest for solitude had taken him out of radio touch with the ships. That, perhaps, was unwise. But he would be careful.

What the scientists of a century ago would have given for an opportunity like this! A human expedition to a comet, an opportunity to test out theories of the origin of the Solar System. But nobody on this expedition was interested in the scientific possibilities, whatever nonsense the Reunited Nations seemed to be feeding the news media as a cover. Wouldn't they be getting a surprise soon! To the astronauts, the Dragon was just a missile which had to be steered in a certain direction. A ready-made, deep-frozen atmosphere, to be dumped on Earth's Moon. But a vestige of scientific curiosity remained. We ought to make some sort of effort to send back some data on the comet, thought Du Toit, idly. After all, there won't be another opportunity like this.

He swung his helmet out of the crack and began examining closely the wall of the kloof. It had curious texture, looking like fabric; narrow, sinuous runnels were crisscrossed by dust veins. He pressed the palm of his glove against the wall and convinced himself that he could feel the roughness. He had a good imagination.

Thoughts of scientific investigation slid from his mind as he imagined the great bulk of the comet, a sleeping Dragon waiting to be warmed into life as it neared the Sun. This was a landscape that no other eyes would ever see, let alone investigate scientifically. He moved on, trying now to think of nothing at all, to blank out all the tedious events of the past months, using the wall to recharge his mental batteries. Breathing deeply, and leaping along rhythmically as he learned the trick of the twist in each step, he began to fall into a meditative, trance-like state, and felt fatigue seeping out of his bones. He glided to halt, cupped in the bowl of ice, and turned slowly to see how far he had come. It was then that he felt the first, faint rumble beneath his feet.

Du Toit froze. His pulse rate and a dozen other physiological signs somersaulted off scale. What was that? Movement where there should be no movement, deep down inside the comet. The Dragon was coming to life — but much too early; it shouldn't stir for weeks yet. For an age he stood motionless, with only the flutter of a

muscle and the beating of his heart preventing the complete fusion of his awareness with the structure of the comet. He felt himself fusing with the ice, imagining layers upon layers of icy crystal plane stretching down into the cryogenic core. He felt that he could detect any microscopic slippage of these crystal planes. Poised on the knife-edge between comet and space, he felt for the heartbeat of the vacuum — but the rumble had stopped. With sudden relief, the answer came to him. The fusion engines! Reese must be testing the main drive. Of course!

Then the world fell apart. Literally. He was thrown loose from the ice and found himself floating in a shower of splinters as the comet convulsed beneath him and a great gaping canyon opened up before him, barely ten meters away along the floor of the kloof. A rising berg of ice, tens of meters across, nudged him to one side as it moved ponderously upward and out into space. Du Toit saw that he was heading for the nearest ice wall, and fast. A spacer's instinct made him lunge at his tool belt, activate the emergency grapple line. There was no time to see whether the explosive harpoon buried itself in solid ice or powdered snow. The stars were obliterated, eclipsed by a moving mountain of ice. Then he hit, and darkness closed in.

When he awoke, he was floating. But the grapple line had held. Thank God. His head was fuzzy and his left elbow bruised and stiff. The suit had not been pierced. But when he triggered his jet pack, nothing happened. He was alive, but his principal means of propulsion was useless. He hauled in the grapple line, hand over hand, until once again he could hook his boots into the surface and "stand" on "solid" ice. How long had he been out? The needle on the gauge showed thirty minutes of oxygen used; given that he'd been unconscious and breathing shallowly, that meant maybe an hour had passed.

What had happened? The massive quake couldn't have been anything to do with Reese. The Dragon, dormant since the birth of the Solar System, had hiccuped. They knew it would happen when the heat of the Sun got stronger — but not this soon. They were still out near Mars, and the Sun was too feeble to melt off even a film of surface ice. No, it had to be the fault of the expedition, somehow, with heat from the engines and the change in stresses caused by halting the comet's spin combining to release an old pressure along a line of weakness that had been there since the dawn of time. But that was no excuse.

He began to pay out the grapple line, crawling now, not leaping, over the kloof floor. Something else was wrong. What was it? His fuddled brain tried to take stock of the surroundings. The Sun! Where had the Sun gone? It should be directly overhead; it had been before the quake. Where was the Sun? Scrabbling frantically onward, slipping and sliding on the ice, digging his toe claws into the ice to stop himself, Du Toit reached the canyon he had seen open up in the kloof floor. But it was no longer a canyon. There was nothing on the other side.

Trying hard to swallow panic, he craned over the edge, and found the Sun. It was down a sheer face of glistening ice. How could that be? How — then his brain finally understood, and Du Toit felt a cold hand seize him in its grip. Surely it couldn't be. He closed his eyes for a moment, but when he opened them the scene was still the same.

In the light of the distant Sun he saw rubble and ice, great blocks of the stuff, occluding the stars: a flotilla of

calved icebergs setting sail upon the sea of the vacuum. With him riding on one of them. Hoping against hope that it wasn't too late, he tripped the Mayday transmitter.

What in God's name was that?" Reese supported herself against the rec room wall as the groggy sleepers assembled. While they slept, she had been on watch, working, as always, at her desk console. Blood seeped from her nose where she had hit a support stanchion when the first big shock had struck. She pawed at the leaking droplets, but it did no good, only staining the sleeve of her tunic. As the myriad tiny droplets slowly settled and were dispersed by the air currents, she spoke through an incongruous pink haze.

Bertorelli proffered the tiny vacuum cleaner they used to clear up such messes, but she waved him aside, turning from one crew member to another as she sought an explanation of what had happened. Nobody had one. Then Finnegan, white from shock, blurted out "Du Toit!" and Reese felt a sickness inside. He was out there, somewhere, a human needle in a landscape they hardly knew in the first place and which had now been twisted out of all recognition by — something. By forces they had failed to recognize or anticipate. By the unexpected — and the unexpected could mean the end for the whole mission, not just Du Toit.

"Mary, get an all-around scan working, at once. Bertorelli, see if *Aries* can be ready to fly. We may have to go out and find him."

As Du Toit gazed down the seemingly endless cliff, his brain suddenly adjusted the perspective. The "cliff" became a flat floor, and it no longer seemed endless. In fact, it was only a few meters across. He stood once again and "walked" across to the other side. Looking over the edge, he saw the same scene repeated. He was on a small chunk of ice, a faceted, irregular lump. Secured by his clawed boots, he could roam at will over the surface, but there was virtually no gravity at all to hold him in place or give a sense of direction. In that case, he told his brain firmly, anywhere I am standing the ground is straight down beneath my feet. And don't you forget it.

A sudden flash of light caught his eye, and he turned (slowly! carefully!) this lump of ice might not be very big, but he preferred to stay on it rather than float off on his own) to look. What was it? Then another flash, slightly to one side, and he realized what was happening. The icebergs surrounding him were rotating, and like faceted jewels they were catching the light of the Sun as they did so. It was beautiful. But admiring the beauty of his surroundings wasn't going to get him back to the safety of Dragon base. There was no reply to his Mayday, which meant that either his transmitter or his receiver were useless. Or both. He'd soon know; if Reese had heard the electronic cry for help she'd have the *Aries* off and running after him in a matter of minutes. After all, he couldn't walk home.

Du Toit continued to stand quietly, watching the shifting display of glinting icebergs around him, conserving energy and oxygen. His own miniature world was also rotating, he noticed, so that the Sun had now "risen" completely to the zenith and was dropping away behind him. Think! he commanded his still dazed brain. There's no reply to my signal, and no sign of *Aries*. They haven't

heard me. He took a small drink of water from the tube next to his mouth and chinned the bar to release a stim-tab. He'd have to pay the price of increased heart rate and higher oxygen consumption in order to clear his head. Maybe Xu was right after all. He wouldn't get out of this hole by physical effort. What he needed was a bright idea, some intelligent scheme to signal his whereabouts to the others. C'mon, Jan, he subvocalized, show Mary you're not just a big physical ape.

He began to feel better, physically and mentally, as the stimulants got to work. The Sun set behind him, and Du Toit saw the comet itself, the Dragon, rising high in the sky of his tiny world. So near, and yet so far. He felt colder in the dark, and, although his brain was clearing and he knew this was purely a psychological reaction, began to walk towards the horizon so that he could see the Sun again. Dig one boot in, and thrust backwards; unhook without pulling yourself to a halt; dig the other boot in, and twist; repeat indefinitely. The rhythm flowed back. And then he had an idea.

He must be out of oxygen by now." Bertorelli and Xu were together in the *Aries II*, floating free amongst the debris of the cometary convulsion. There was little doubt that Du Toit was out there somewhere, but where? Hopefully, they'd nosed among the fragments looking for a spacesuited figure, but to no avail. It was far worse than the proverbial needle in a haystack. He might be no more than a hundred meters away, but with no means of signaling his presence they'd never know, unless they struck very lucky indeed.

Xu thumbed the talkback button and spoke to Reese at Dragon base. "We'll stay out here until we run out of air if you like. But I'd rather be carrying out an intelligent search pattern than just drifting at random."

"There is no intelligent search pattern, Mary. He could be anywhere in the shoal of ice. It's up to him to signal us, any way he can, and then I want you out there ready to grab him. I'll give it another hour, then we'll admit defeat."

Reese turned away from the console wearily. Things could have been worse. Their main work was done; the fusion engines were mounted to shift the orbit of the comet as required, and the installation had only suffered minor damage in the quake. They could complete the mission without Du Toit. And they'd all known someone might get killed along the way. But somehow the idea of losing him on a sightseeing trip, on his day off, seemed much worse than if he had suffered an accident while working on the engine installation.

Wenzel's head came through the hatch, followed by the rest of his long, thin body. Politely, he adjusted his attitude to match the "up" of his commander.

"Boss, I've got something weird. I don't know what it is, but it doesn't make sense, and you said to watch out for anything unusual at all."

"What is it, Chuck?" Wenzel had been monitoring the search program set up by Xu. It was their last hope of detecting any signal Du Toit might try to make.

"Well, it's like this. All these chunks of ice out there are rotating, and I've had the computer work out all their

Continued to Page 26

By Michael Swanwick

Art by Robert J. Pasternak

After the dust had settled but before the army could bring its ordnance to bear, Ron was able to ask the alien a few questions. So of course the first thing that occurred to him was, given a flying saucer that could take you anywhere you wished, cross the galaxy in an instant, lay open all of space-time like a nine-dimensional road-map — given all this, why had the alien come here, to the dreary Richmond bedroom suburb of Highland Springs, Virginia?

"I am of an ancient space-faring race," said the alien. "I've seen half of all that is remarkable to see already, and confidently expect to see the rest before I die. And I heard that this was the asshole of the universe."

"Well, you got *that* right."

The saucer rested in the football field out back of the high school. It was a hot day and they stood in amiable silence for a while, sharing Ron's lunch, passing the Yoo-Hoo bottle back and forth and watching the clouds of dust kicked up by columns of tanks in the distance. Sirens screamed as the county police raced to reach the saucer first. "You have to stopper it with your thumb, and give it a good shaking now and then," Ron said. "To get rid of that chemical taste." Jet contrails crisscrossed a cloudless blue sky overhead. They'd be dropping the napalm soon.

Mrkao licked the last bit of Moon Pie from his long, five-jointed fingers. He was seven feet tall, lean, blue-skinned, and sort of naked — his features were so reserved, eyes lidless, mouth lipless, genital area smooth, it hardly seemed to count. He tossed the Yoo-Hoo bottle into the weeds at the edge of the field and said, "So. You coming or not?"

Ron thought of his home and family, the kids in school, his friends and teachers and life in Highland Springs. "Sure, I guess so," he said. "What the fuck?"

They climbed the ramp, passing through the swirling silver body of the saucer into a control room that was stark and sterile and had a great picture window above the control panel. Mrkao stationed himself in the center and rippled his fingers in a peculiarly fluid manner. What looked like a ping-pong ball rose up in front of him. "Say farewell to your world and civilization, Earthling. We go now to join a far more advanced — say. Do you want to mutilate some cattle before we go?"

The army had finally arrived, and was setting up field pieces. "No," Ron said nervously.

"Just thought I'd ask." The alien touched the ping-pong ball and they shot five miles straight up.

They paused to dump a load of aluminum foil and some weather balloons — "It's kind of traditional," Mrkao explained — then slammed up, into deep space.

As long as they were in the System, they took in the sights: on Jupiter they saw the Great Red Spot, an oval vortex of stable chaos larger than the Earth and

self-perpetuating. They checked out all the ringed planets, but of course Saturn was best, its braided rings especially. They saw Uranus, rolling along sideways, its axis in the plane of the ecliptic, and icebound Umbriel as well. Deep in Venus's atmosphere they witnessed a lightning storm, thousands of bolts electrifying the darkness while sulfuric rain fell from the clouds only to evaporate before reaching ground. They made a quick run through the Valles Marineris on Mars, peeked in the top of Olympus Mons, and took off to catch the volcanoes of Io. They watched a comet pass too close to the sun and break up in a fury of ionized gases. They soared under a loop prominence to watch sunfleas hatching in the cool shelter of its magnetic flux. The newborn creatures were each the size of Manhattan Island. The tour took up most of the afternoon, and then Mrkao said, "It's time we headed home."

"Why?" Ron asked.

"That question has no meaning for such as you and I," Mrkao said.

But Ron was staring raptly out the window. They were passing through the corona, buzzing the surface of the sun, and in his distraction he wasn't paying close enough attention to catch the sadness in the alien's voice.

Ron got one quick look at Mrkao's home planet (turquoise seas, coral pink continents, green clouds) as the saucer pierced the atmosphere, and then they were hovering over a vast city. "We call it City," Mrkao said.

"Doesn't that get confusing?"

"No, because we only have the one."

City was a marvel of uniformity in design, artistically jumbled and overlapped cubes laid out in three concentric circles, all the buildings identical and harmonious in white. At the center of the innermost circle was a perfectly round lake from whose center rose an enormous stepped pyramid. "Wow," Ron said. "What is *that* for?"

Mrkao touched the ping-pong ball and the image of the pyramid enlarged on the viewscreen, so that Ron could see that thousands of skinny blue aliens were climbing up and down its sides. Mrkao shrugged. "We like to climb steps," he said.

They touched down in Mrkao's back yard. He attached a hose to his saucer and thumbed a toggle switch. The saucer lost shape, melted down to a blob, and then was sucked into the hose. Ron glanced down at the pink grass squirming gently underfoot, then up at the turquoise sky, and reflected on how far he was from home.

Mrkao rolled up the hose, looped it over a hook, and walked into the house. Ron followed. There were two more skinny blue aliens inside. They glanced incuriously at Ron.





MAX

"Hi, Mom, Pop. I'm back from Highland Springs."

"That's nice," one of the aliens said. "You didn't mutate any cattle while you were there, did you?"

"Naw."

"Good boy."

That evening, after a quick but tasteless supper of food cubes, they all four sat around a beachball-sized sphere of mercury that oozed out of a hole in the ceiling and floated head-high in the air. Pastel lights played gently on its lamenent surface. It was a lot like TV on a slow night.

"So tell me," Ron said, "You guys belong to a superior culture, what kind of major wisdom do you know that I don't? I mean, like is there a God or what? What's the ultimate purpose of existence? Stuff like that."

"Oh, we wouldn't know about any of those things," Mrkao's mother, Xylpao, said. "Only sentient races deal with questions like that."

"Sentient? What do you mean by sentient?"

"Capable of sensation and consciousness, and therefore possessing free will. Aware."

"Hey, but of course you are! Why would you —" Then, catching the cool amusement on their flat blue faces, "Did I say something funny?"

The aliens all laughed. "It's that word again. Why. You have to understand that 'why' doesn't occur in nature. It implies free will. You can't ask why a rock falls when you throw it in the air. It has no reasons for doing so."

"It falls because its mass is attracted to the greater mass of the planet," Ron said. "That's elementary physics."

"Yes, but that's not why it falls. That's *how*. Why implies a choice. The stone has no say over its behavior, nor have we, nor have you. That's because we're none of us sentient."

"Now just a damn minute. I know for a fact that I'm aware."

"Well, naturally you'd say that. It's programmed into you," Mrkao's father said. His name was Zrglao. "No, take my word for it, you're just another meat robot. Like ourselves."

"That's right. It's like you're a refrigerator," Mrkao said. "Somebody opens your door and a light comes on, so you think: Hey, I just had an idea. But you only think you can think because you don't know what thinking really feels like. It's all reflex and no consciousness."

"Of course I'm conscious," Ron said angrily. "I think, I sense, I feel pain. I do whatever I want."

"We used to believe that too," Xylpao said, "before we went to the center of the galaxy." The colored lights swirled madly on the mercury.

"The center of the galaxy? What happened there?"

"Everything," Zrglao said. "Nothing."

At the center of the galaxy, it turned out after you subtracted that spare alien rhetoric, was a gigantic black hole, larger than the Solar System, swallowing stars whole and in the process of gobbling down the entire galaxy. This monster, wrapped in the screams of dying suns, was artificial. It had been created. By whom? Ron asked. By the sentient races of the galaxy, Mrkao's father explained. As a race grew, its energy needs would grow increasingly greater, first to encompass all of a planet's total energy resources, and then later, all of its star's. But

even that would ultimately not be enough. There would come a time when the energy needed just for storage of information would be greater than the total output of all the stars accessible to that race.

So the most advanced races in existence had collapsed the core stars of the Milky Way, imploding them into a supermassive black hole, and gone to live inside it, within the galaxy's dark heart.

"What's it like in there?"

"Literally unimaginable," Zrglao said, "for the likes of you and us." But he explained that within the fierce compression of the galaxy's heart, energy and information were organized differently. There was no natural law within the singularity, and thus no limitations; everything was possible and nothing was forbidden. Even with thousands of races residing in the black hole, each individual could control the power of worlds.

Ron thought that over. "Hey, I read that nothing can get out of a black hole. How do you know that all these races didn't just get crushed and die?"

"The sentient races have knowledge beyond our understanding. They don't actually exit the black hole, but they send out ... projections. Emanations. When our race was younger, we sent our best scientists and investigators to the center of the galaxy. They were met by these entities, and invited to join in the wealth, power, and knowledge of the union of sentient races. We could be citizens, provided only that we could prove our sentience. So of course we tried. But we failed their test." Zrglao fell silent.

"What was the test?"

"We would rather not say."

And no matter how he tried, Ron could get no more information than that from them.

The aliens slept on softly billowing gusts of air that held them off the floor more comfortably than any mattress could have. It was a strange sensation for Ron, and since he couldn't understand the technology — Mrkao said it involved "gentling the gravity" over a small area — he didn't entirely trust it.

Ron hung sleepless in midair for hours, thinking of the races at the heart of the galaxy, and of Zrglao's assurance that he wasn't conscious. At last he got up, went over to Mrkao's bed, and shook the alien awake. "Fire up your saucer. We're going to the center of the galaxy and have it out with those geeks."

Mrkao sat up, stared expressionlessly at Ron with those big, lidless eyes of his. "Well," he said finally. "It hardly matters what we do, does it? It's not as if we were aware."

Half an hour later they were in the center of the galaxy. The viewscreen displayed a rich backdrop of stars cut through suddenly by an obsidian sphere, black and lightless, something like a bowling ball. Blue haze stretched faint about the sphere's equator, a monochrome aurora frozen into motionlessness — the accretion disk. It looked like something that Disney Studios might have whomped up. Dykstra could have bested it on an off day. Ron took one look and muttered disgustedly, "Jesus, it's the Planet of the Cheap Special Effects out there."

Mrkao swung them halfway around the sphere. The stars shifted, but otherwise nothing changed.

"How long are we going to have to wait before —" Ron began.

The air filled with wings. They fanned and swirled in multicolored pinwheels, five and seven in a group, Seraphic arrangements of feathers and light. They were everywhere, brushing against his arms and face, so thick he had trouble breathing. "Not long at all," Mrkao said glumly.

"Keep your chin up, old buddy," Ron said softly. "We can go the distance, if you just hang tough." Then, louder, "Hey, *Feathers!*"

The wings froze into immobility, eyes opening in each. Green, brown, blue, and orange eyes all focused coldly on Ron. He felt his hand rise up of its own will before his face. A mouth formed in the center of his palm and said, "Yes?"

"We're applying for citizenship."

His hand smiled pityingly. "Citizenship is too precious to be extended to inanimate objects. Ask your friend."

Ron sneered. "Yeah, well, you know what I think? I think the reason Mrkao's people lost out is that you cheated them. I think they never got a fair shake in the first place. You wanted to keep your precious citizenship all to yourselves and so you gave them a rigged test."

Thunder slammed through the saucer. The hundreds of angelic wings fluttered wildly.

"You're an annoying little creature, did you know that?" his hand snapped. "It's not your fault, of course. Very well. You shall be tested." The mouth disappeared from his hand, reappeared on Mrkao's bulging forehead. "And you? Do you wish to be tested as well?"

"I —" the alien faltered. Ron nodded and winked encouragingly at his friend. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Very well."

The saucer exploded.

Nada. Ron hung spreadeagled in nada, nothingness, pure formless nada, a void that had no qualities but nada, knew no God but nada, no interior but nada, no exterior but nada, nothing that was not nada, no heart nor soul but nada, no history but nada, no future but nada, no negation but the negation of nada and nada, pues nada. It was like a bad story by Hemingway.

Then the Universe spoke: *Okay, wiseass. Here's your test.* Light unfolded all around him, and he was standing before a Victorian-era hotel, white with wraparound porches on the first and second floors, a red tin roof and a large sign: Genteel Seaside Resort. It folded twice through fifth-dimensional space, and he was standing in the lobby.

"Here's your key, sir," the woman behind the reception desk said. "Your room is up the stairs and down the hall. Supper is served at six-thirty, and you will be required to wear a jacket and tie. Enjoy your stay at the Genteel."

"Thank you," Ron said bemusedly. There was a bag by his feet. He hoisted it and went to his room.

Sitting on his bed, waiting for him, was a thin, scholarly-looking girl, barefoot in a grey cashmere sweater and long denim skirt. She put down a fashion magazine and looked up expectantly at him, eyes brown behind big round tortoiseshells. "Uh, hi," Ron said uncertainly.

The girl reached into the purse beside her, took out a lipstick tube, and wrote H 2 U 2 on the wall in big red letters. As Ron gaped, a small voice in the back of his head said, Hello to you too. It was a kind of telepathic subcaptioning. As soon as he'd understood it, the lettering was

gone from the wall.

R U S1? she wrote. "What?" he said, simultaneously with the telepathic translation. Are you someone? "Sure I am," he said. "My name is Ron, what's yours?"

M MLE, she wrote. I M N MN81. Mine's Emily. I am an emanation.

"You're part of the test, aren't you?"

She smiled and nodded.

The room boomed full of swirling wings. Ron's hand wove up like a cobra and the mouth said, "Okay, Bozo, here are the ground rules. You will be staying here for one week, during which time you will be expected to engage in normal social activities. Among the guests will be several ringers, chosen from your sexual fantasies. Your task is to refrain from sex for the duration of your stay. If you can, then you and your race will be extended citizenship, given a full share of our accumulated knowledge and wealth, and those who wish to join us within the black hole may."

"That's not much of a test. What's the catch?"

"It's not supposed to be much of a test, you irritating little automaton. It's so simple the stupidest sentient being alive could understand it. The reward for restraint is so disproportionately great that the most venal creature in existence could exercise self-control. It's only meant to keep out inanimate objects, like yourself. Your rutting reflex will cut in, and you'll tell yourself it doesn't count, that nobody will notice."

"So what's with Emily here?"

I M N A 4 U, she wrote. I am an ally for you.

"You doubted the test was fair. Emily is the sending of a sentient being living within the black hole who believes you are sentient. She's here to ensure an honest test. Why she should care is beyond me. But capriciousness is, after all, a quality of free will."

Abruptly, the wings imploded out of existence, with a boom that rattled the windows, leaving nothing behind but a lingering aura of malice. "Jerk," Ron muttered. Then he saw by the clock that it was time to go to supper and — presumably — begin his test. "Well, here goes," he said. "You want to come along?"

Emily shook her head. I J 8, she wrote, and picked up her fashion magazine. I just ate.

Hmet his first sexual fantasy on the stairs. Her name, according to the issue of *Big Bimbos* back home under his mattress, was Aunt Babs, and her breasts were each larger than her head. Ron could smell the makeup on her, it was so thickly applied, and her skirt was so short and her heels so high that she had to clutch Ron's arm to get down the stairs without falling. She wore black fishnet stockings.

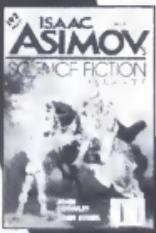
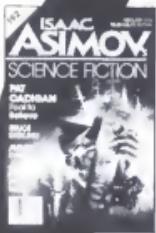
"I'm so grateful, hon. If there's any way I can make it ... up to you, just let me know." Aunt Babs sounded just like Mae West when she spoke, and those great, pillow-mounds of flesh pushed against him whenever she turned his way, bulging halfway out of her low-cut sweater like loaves of overeasted dough on the rise. It was really embarrassing.

Mrkao was waiting for him in the lobby. He watched Aunt Babs sashay away. "Friend of yours?"

Ron had been expecting sexual fantasies out of Anaïs Nin, or maybe Helmut Newton, elegant and dangerous women. Milt Caniff's Dragon Lady, Germaine Greer in a

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black lace teddy. He hadn't been prepared for Aunt Babs. "Let's not talk about me," he said. "What's your test?"

Mrkao turned away. "I'd rather not say."

The dining room was large, and Ron and Mrkao were seated at a table with an orthodontist and his wife and three slim young women from San Francisco. They introduced themselves as Ashley, Ming, and Caroline, but Ron knew them best as the Multiracial Orgy Sluts of a memorable pictorial involving lots of Mazola oil and the creative use of Nautilus equipment.

"We're from Wheeling," the orthodontist said. "Where do you lads hail from?"

"Planet," Mrkao said.

"Highland Springs, Virginia."

"Really?" the orthodontist said. "I heard that it's —"

His wife stuck an elbow in his ribs and he coughed. "— a very nice place."

"Yeah, thanks," Ron said. He tried not to stare as Ashley explored her salad with one questing finger, which she then held up to slowly lick away the dressing.

"Don't you just love salad oil?" she asked Ron. Her friends giggled when he blushed.

It was going to be a long week.

After dinner Mrkao went to his room and locked the door behind himself. "You have your temptations to face, and I have mine," he said. Listening from the hall, Ron heard vague noises as if something heavy were moving about inside. He went down to the lobby.

Emily was there. I C U 8.

"Yeah, just now." A couple of overpainted young ladies were ostentatiously eyeing him from the far side of the room. Cherry and Virginia, the First Time Hookers. "Listen, you interested in a game of backgammon or something?"

Y O? Why naught?

They played board games for a while, then borrowed a deck of cards from a nearby Vegas showgirl (declining her offer to gamble for "house stakes"), and spent the rest of the evening at pinochle. Ron begged off early, went to his room, latched the door and lay down on the bed.

He stared at the ceiling for a time, listening to the sound of ping-pong balls bouncing against the other side of one wall and wishing he didn't know what was going on in the next room. Then there was a discreet knock on his door. He got up and opened it.

It was Emily. She took out her lipstick and wrote on the wall, S OK 4 U 2 M. It's okay for you to masturbate.

Ron felt beyond embarrassment. "Really?" he said weakly. "I mean, it's within the rules?"

She smiled sadly, sympathetically. Y O? Then, coloring, she averted her face, and fled.

Ron latched the door, flung himself down on his bed. Well ... why naught indeed?

The next morning began quietly enough, and except for Aunt Babs's unfortunate lapse with the summer sausage, breakfast went well. Ron filled up on waffles and fried eggs, and went exploring.

The illusion of normalcy, such as it was, did not extend beyond the hotel itself. Sitting on the porch, Ron could see all of the galaxy's center. He found that if he stared directly at the black hole itself, pretty soon he got that old familiar feeling that everything was browning at the

edges. Then the colors would begin to crawl across his vision, and the next thing he knew he'd be hallucinating like mad. Ron had never understood why old people were so big on porch-sitting, but now he was hooked. It had all the entertainment value of illegal drugs combined with the off-the-shelf convenience of reality. He spent hours on the porch, just sitting and rocking.

There was a pleasant secondary effect to this activity as well. He found that so long as he was zoned-out by the black hole, he wasn't bothered by the libidinous attentions of fantasy women lifted from his collection of stroke magazines. Blasted out of his skull, he didn't even notice their presence. And what he didn't know existed he couldn't give in to.

He was beginning to feel optimistic again.

Mrkao, on the other hand, preferred spending his time climbing up and down the hotel's many steps. "You ought to try it," he told Ron at dinner. "You just go up and up and up and up. Then when you're tired of that, you come down."

"Sounds a lot like drugs," Ron said amiably, pointedly ignoring the pom-pom girls practicing their leaps and splits across the room. They weren't wearing any panties, but after a while you got used to that.

"A bewildering taste," Mrkao said. He dug into the batter-fried terrapin pill; like Ron he had gotten so involved he'd skipped lunch.

"Hey, Emily, you guys got drugs inside the black hole?"
0, U C — she began. No, you see —

A thunderclap shook the room, breaking windows and shattering crystal. Wheels of wings swirled like feathered buzzsaws, and a gigantic mouth opened up in the table. Half the dishes fell into its enormous maw. "All right, you treacherous lump of presentient animosity —!" it bellowed.

"Hiya, Birdpuss. How's it hanging?"

"I'll hang you!" the table screamed. "According to the terms of your test, you're supposed to engage in normal social activity, and instead, you've spent all day watching movies in your hindbrain."

Ron shrugged. "Hey, what can I say? For me, being stoned is a normal social activity." He delicately wiped his lips with his napkin and tossed it down the table's gullet. "As a sentient being I have the right to spend my time getting stupid, if that's what I want."

The table gnashed its teeth. "That's it! I'm calling off the test!"

"I told you the test was rigged."

"You and your four-eyed friend can —" the mouth roared.

Emily stood, her eyes blazing. R U S I M 2 I? she wrote. Are you suggesting I am too involved? B4 U G 2 F ... Before you go too far ...

The feather wheels slowed, turned away, eyes refusing to meet hers. "No, of course not," the mouth mumbled. "Nobody has ever implied you were less than perfectly fair."

C U R she wrote. See you remember.

"I will," the mouth promised hastily. "Yes, of course. Of course." It faded away in the heat of her glare.

F U 2, Emily scrawled angrily on her plate. Then, before the telepathic subcaptioning could cut in, she threw a cloth napkin over the comment.

It was the first hint Ron had of the tensions that existed

between Emily and his antagonist.

Things got nastier after that. The next day Ron went to his room to pick up a paperback and found a glistening mass of oiled flesh in his bed. It involved Ashley, Ming, Caroline and the couple from Wheeling. "Hey!" Ron said. "Those sheets have just been changed."

Heads popped up.

"Oh, loosen up!"

"Party poop!"

"Sissy!"

"Tie him to the bed!" The orthodontist's wife — naked but for her rhinestone glasses and pillbox hat — produced a length of rope.

"Now, listen —" Ron began. But they rose up from his bed, bearing silk scarves, leather straps, handcuffs, and bungee cords. The orthodontist, pot belly gleaming and hornrims askew, led.

Frantically, Ron leaped back into the hall, slammed the door and jammed it shut with his wallet. "This wasn't in the rules! It doesn't count unless it's voluntary!" The door shivered as the orgiasts slammed into it.

A deep, feathery chuckle echoing behind him, Ron made for the lobby. Time to get a new room.

Aunt Babs was working the front desk. "Ooh, baby." She leaned far over the counter. "What can I do for you?"

A difficult half-hour later, he found Mrkao in the reading room, perusing a copy of *Tom Brown's School Days*. The shelves were covered with yellowing books. "Can I get you something to read?" the alien asked.

"Got any Brion Gysin there?"

"Will Hugh Walpole do? I'm kind of involved in the Thomas Hughes."

Ron took the proffered tome. "I guess he'll have to."

They sat quietly, reading. Two Cat-Fighting Cuties began fighting over him, rolling over and over on the floor, tearing off each other's clothing with their teeth. But eventually they left, and the afternoon was peaceful again.

Mrkao sighed.

Ron put his book down. "What's the problem, old buddy?"

"It is the test." Mrkao colored, his blue face taking on a distinctly greenish cast. "I have lost faith in my ability to pass it."

"Whoa, don't say that. This is the third day — you're almost halfway there. You got the stuff. You're going to win through."

"I have come to doubt that." Mrkao stared at the ground. "You have no idea what I must face. My strength is only so great, and yet each time I resist the temptation is doubled."

"That just shows how desperate old Birdpuss is getting. He wouldn't be cranking up the heat if he weren't scared." Emily entered the room at that moment and he said, "Hey, Emily. Tell Mrkao he's going to pass the test. He's kind of down in the dumps over the whole thing."

Emily frowned at the alien and shook her head. 0 UU D9 I, she wrote. No use denying it. H S O S. He is naught sentient.

Mrkao stood abruptly, turned, and left, his face like blue ice. "Jeeze, Emily," Ron said. "That was cold."

I M S B9 S NE, I she replied. S I D H8 A N NTT. I am as benign as anyone. Still, I do hate a nonsentient entity.

T 0 2 — They ought to —

The phone rang, and Emily answered it. S 4 U, she wrote.

Ron took the receiver. "Yes?"

"Cattle lips," a heavy voice said. "Big rubbery piles of them. You could roll around in them and throw them up in the air. Think of it. Doesn't that sound nice?"

"No," Ron said.

There was an astonished silence. Then, "You mean, you don't like — oh, that's right. You're the one with the obsession with secondary reproductive strategies. I have such trouble telling you creeps apart. Well, put the blue-skinned one on, will you?"

"Feathers, is that you? Listen, I've heard some pretty disgusting raps in my time, but that one just about takes the cake."

"That's so predictable. You're programmed not to like cattle mutilation, just like a little machine. Now if you were to spontaneously decide: Hey, why not try a little cattle mutilating, just this once — who knows, maybe I'll like it? That would be evidence of an independent type of mind."

"Yeah, well, why don't you spontaneously go pound sand?"

"I knew you were going to say that." The phone clicked and went dead.

Ron turned back to Emily. "You really ought to ease off on Mrkao. Even if he doesn't make it — and me, I'm not writing him off yet — he deserves a little respect for his feelings."

Emily turned white. EZ 4 U 2 S. Easy for you to say. Furiously she went on writing, until the wall was covered with letters and numbers. She said that she despised nonsentients who passed themselves off as people. They ought, she felt, to have more respect for themselves than to walk through life unaware. They were a living mockery of all who had bothered to become intelligent, and she, for one, was not amused. Her rant went on and on. Ron's comment had really tapped into something.

Reading between the lines, Ron came to suspect that her own people had had trouble passing the test. He waited until she had written herself out and then asked her about that. She looked away for a long moment. When she turned back her eyes brimmed with tears. I W ONLE 1. I was the only one.

He put his arm around her then, and she cried into his shoulder.

After a time, she calmed enough to tell him her story. Her race was a headstrong and willful one. Its weakness had been a tendency toward self-destructive absolutes. For their test they had been given an ontology bomb, with a trigger for each one of them, and told that the sentient races would accept anyone who didn't choose oblivion.

Her race had been on the cusp of sentience, and she alone had passed through.

To change the subject Ron asked a question that had been bugging him for some time: exactly what it was like inside the black hole. "I mean, I'd hate to think I'd gone through all this for something it turns out I don't want, you know? Like somebody tells you how great opera is and you save your money to hear one and it turns out to be bullshit, if you see what I mean."

Emily thought, nodded. OK. She cupped her hands together, then opened them, revealing a liquid bubble of

light, its surface shimmering with meaning. Staring into its depths, Ron saw vast involved structures of information, and he understood them all perfectly.

Explaining Emily's world without being there was, even with this tool, like trying to play the Brandenburg Concertos on a police whistle, or to squeeze *Finnegans Wake* through Emily's alphanumeric babytalk. Still, he got a rough glimmering of what it was like:

Emily lived in a universe in which each thought was a living city of possibility made real and vibrant, and every movement gracefully coordinated with all previous movements so that one's entire life was a ballet, flawless, without a wasted instant or the least aspect of regret, and every breath a witty comment on and celebration of a thousand aspects of one's personal history. Information was so accessibly organized that it was possible to squeeze a lifetime's worth of experience into a single instant. Power was so absolute that entire worlds winked in and out of existence in response to passing whims. The insiders dwelt within unfolding beauty so varied it could not tire or cloy. They were never bored.

Ron was awed. "You live like that?"

She nodded. The bubble of light faded from her hand.

"Why did you leave it? I mean, sending even a projection of yourself out here, where there's not a fraction of the..." He stopped, boggled by the extent of her sacrifice.

I B N U, Emily wrote. I believe in you.

Shyly, she reached out to touch his hand, and there must have been some lingering trace essence of the bubble of light on her skin, for he realized with sudden insight that even goddesses could be lonely, could wish for the companionship of a like personality, and saw, however dimly, the possibility, when he himself entered the black hole, of a partnership that would heterodyne them both to synergistic heights of power and creativity far beyond the reach of either acting alone.

"Wow," Ron said.

The grandfather clock in the hall chimed ten, and Emily looked up, startled. T L8? That late?

Reluctantly, Ron stood. "I guess it's time for me to hit the sack."

She nodded, smiling. 4 M 2. For me too.

"Well, good night. I guess."

Neither moved. Smiling, they lingered, unwilling to leave. At last, Ron made a major effort and managed to wrench himself away.

On the way to bed, Ron dropped by Mrkao's room. There were muffled sounds from within, as if something heavy and bovine were stirring about. Ron listened briefly, then knocked.

The sounds ceased.

After a second, the door opened a crack, and Mrkao stuck out a haggard face. "Yeah?" he said.

"Just wanted to be sure everything was okay."

"Yeah, sure," the alien said. He glanced back nervously into the room. "Look, I — I gotta get back to something, okay? I'll talk to you later." He closed the door in Ron's face.

As he walked away, Ron could've sworn he heard something moo.

The days blended one into the other in a haze of sameness: the nude aerobics every morning before breakfast, the ubiquitous hall orgies, the porch-sitting,

lunch with a succession of Naughty Nurses, Prep School Nymphos, and Overendowed Swedish Proctologists, more porch-sitting, a little stair-climbing, supper with Mud-Wrestling Bondage Nuns, Librarians in Leather, and Bodybuilding Diesel Marines, followed by marathon pinochle or checkers with Emily and Mrkao, with the occasional surprise incursion by White Trash Astronauts in Heat, Door-to-Door Couch Dancers, or Foot-Worshipping Mormon Missionaries thrown in for good measure.

Eventually it all took on a heightened, surrealistic sense of normality. Ron adapted. He walked through each day like a zombie, paying his surroundings as little attention as possible, concentrating on the small pleasures of time with his friends and ignoring the rest, and spending as much time stoned as humanly possible. Stoically waiting for the week to end. It was a lot like being in school.

Then one lunchtime Mrkao said, "This is the day, friend human."

"Huh? What day?"

"The day of our triumph. Now ends the testing of our honor. On the morrow, we shall the both of us be granted citizenship."

"Yeah?" Ron was surprised and pleased to discover the week had finally gone by. "So you haven't given in yet, huh? How 'bout that, Emily? What do you think of Mrkao now?"

Emily shook her head. EE S A T O she wrote. He's still a total zero.

They finished the meal in tense silence.

Sitting on the porch that afternoon, rocking, Ron felt oddly restive, distracted, unwilling to surrender himself to contemplation of the black hole. After a while he got up and went back inside.

The halls were empty. There was no sound anywhere but the distant rattle of Mrkao going up and down the fire escape. The naked women were not in evidence. Ron figured his tormentor's attention must be elsewhere. He strolled through the hotel, enjoying the quiet. It was a nice place on its own terms. He thought he might recreate it when he came into his power.

When he came to the lobby, he discovered Emily, straight-backed and angry, talking with a roomful of rotating circular wings. A halo of eyeballs circled her head, looking inward, and a single mouth fluttered in the air like a pink butterfly.

Neither noticed him.

"Emily, you can't really prefer this ... this ... wind-up creature over me!"

Oho, Ron thought.

O F O Emily wrote distractedly. Oh, fuck off.

The feathers whirled in enormous agitation. "Emily, do you remember the first world we created together? The gas giant with the orbital rings of water? The cities and forests afloat within its bubbles? What songs the sirens sang! I always thought that one of our best efforts."

She folded her arms and turned sternly away.

"You desolate me! I spend all my time mourning your love. Could you but see what forlorn eternities of stone and vacuum I wander now — surely that would move you to pity."

Emily squeezed her eyes tight, shook her head.

Ron slipped away noiselessly. He'd had enough experience with relationships to know that there was nothing he could do here. This was something Emily had to

deal with by herself.

That evening Feathers went mad.

Ron went to his room to ditch his jacket and tie after supper, and when he opened the door gravity cut out and he floated forward into darkness. The door slammed shut, leaving him spinning slowly in the void. Everywhere he looked was the same: a moving blackness, as if giant snakes were astir in a universe of black tapioca. For a second he thought he was having a flashback. Then two red gleams of light appeared, resolved into eyes, and were eclipsed by an opening mouth large as a garbage truck.

"Holy crap!" he said. This didn't look like any fantasy he'd ever had.

A deep voice chuckled in his ear. "Having fun?"

He whirled around. Nobody there. "Feathers!"

His eyes couldn't adjust. He sensed more than saw the monstrosities about him, appearing and disappearing as they swam through night's dark pudding. "I think it's time we settled this puerile little contest of wills right here and now, don't you?"

Something moved closer, growing as it came. He found himself flinching from its touch only to realize it was still approaching. It was one big mother. "So what's the deal here? You figure if you scare me enough I'll agree to throw the contest? Is that what you expect?"

"Oh no," the voice said warmly. "I expect you to die in agony and terror. Sometimes the straightforward solutions are best." A pervasive serpentine muskiness wrapped itself about him. Ron's skin crawled.

"You're cheating," he said desperately. "This is dead against all the rules we agreed to at the beginning."

"So what?"

"Well, I just don't think Emily is going to like this. When she finds out, she's never going to talk to you again."

"I've taken great care to ensure that she won't find out. And what she doesn't know can't —"

A door slammed open in the darkness.

U DVS SOB! Emily stood within a rectangle of light. She strode forward across the void, wooden floor solidifying under her feet like ice forming on a pond's surface. When she came to Ron she reached up in the air and yanked him down. He staggered, found his balance. It felt good to have gravity underfoot again.

"Listen, Emily, it's not what you think," Feathers cried.

She stamped her foot and Ron's room materialized about them.

"I can explain!" The wing wheels huddled to the far side of the room. "Just give me a chance!" He was howling now. "For pity's sake, Emily!" And even Ron knew that was the wrong approach. Nice kid though she was, Emily was a little short on pity.

She stamped her foot again, and the hotel shook. The wings exploded, scattering feathers everywhere, and Ron's rival was banished to the outer darkness.

It was all over. Ron felt exhilarated and exhausted, drained and filled with energy all at the same time. He looked at Emily. She seemed ordinary enough outwardly, and yet there was enough power within that frail frame to demolish worlds. "Hey," he said. "Do you ever drink beer?"

She giggled. OKZNLE.

Ron ordered a case from room service along with a boom box and some tapes. Not the kind of stuff you could ordinarily order at a hotel, but then the Genteel was anything but ordinary. Might as well get some use out of it. When the stuff arrived, he put some Killdozer in the box and leaned back on the bed to listen to their definitive cover of "Cinnamon Girl." Emily sat down beside him, and together they downed a few beers.

After a while Emily took off her glasses and put them in her purse. She had really quite nice eyes. Ron looked into them and said, "I love you."

I L U 2, she wrote on the wall. Ron put an arm around her shoulders, popped another beer.

"Hey," he said, "you think maybe tomorrow when I'm let into the club, you and I can, you know, see each other?"

Her eyes sparkled. Y 0? she wrote. She leaned back into his arm, smiling, eyes closed. He kissed the top of her head.

Then, somehow, Ron had his hand under her sweater and was feeling for her breast. She turned her head and they kissed, deeply, moistly. She drew away with a gasp, and then she was unzipping his jeans. She took him out and bent over him.

Emily hesitated. ? she wrote on the wall. Ron was pretty drunk by then. "Go ahead, baby," he said. "Who's going to know?"

He figured it didn't really count since it was just her mouth.

When he woke up the next morning, Emily was gone.

The rug was littered with crushed beer cans, and his pants were tangled around his knees. The Genteel was silent; not a girlish giggle or orgasmic squeal to be heard. Ron groaned and stared bleakly up at the ceiling. He'd screwed up again.

In the cold morning light, it was obvious that last night had been part of the test. Emily was a bugger for fairness. The test had been for a week; it would've been cheating to let him off the hook before the week was done. So she'd given him one last opportunity to fail and he'd taken it. Just like Mrkao's parents had said he would. Just like Feathers had said he would. Just like a brainless meat robot.

Head throbbing, he sat up in the bed. There were lipstick marks on the far wall. Emily had left a message for him.

U F 0, it said. You fucking zero.

And that was all she wrote.

The saucer was parked on the porch; Ron noticed it when he dropped off his keys at the front desk. He went upstairs, knocked on Mrkao's door and walked in without waiting to be invited.

Mrkao looked up groggily from a pile of cattle lips. He essayed a sheepish grin and Ron knew their friendship was not going to survive his having seen the alien like this. Mrkao would never forgive him. "It's time to go," Ron said. "You can drop me off in Highland Springs on your way."

Half an hour later, he was back home.

So we don't get to join the Galactic Federation, huh?"

Chip asked. Chip was kind of a dweeb, but he had a full pack of Marlboros, so he was included in the gang when they met behind the bleachers to talk things over.

Ron shrugged. He'd caught a week's detention for skipping classes and now he was on disciplinary pro, but none of it really seemed to matter anymore. "I guess."

"It was all kind of a waste of time, then?" Steve said. He fired up a match with his thumbnail and drew deeply on his 'boro.

"I got a blowjob out of it," Ron said, after a moment's thought. "And it got me out of school for a few days."

"Yeah," his friends agreed. "That's cool, then."

Which was true. They'd lost a lot in the past week, more than the rest of the human race would ever know: infinite wealth, absolute power and knowledge, eternal life, the chance to grow intellectually and spiritually beyond the collective dreams of all the thinkers and mystics and artists who had ever been. The doors to the universe were closed to them forever. Still, everyone knew that if you couldn't be conscious, cutting classes was the next best thing. □

Same Song, Different Star

By Ann K. Schwader

*Fed it down the memory hole
the minute I read it:
official regrets
just one more transit tragedy
black holes are tricky
don't I know*

*you flew it closer every time
voidflirter
avoiding the inner darkness
that dragged me deeper down
portside
farewells & promises to stay
next time
you never did*

*some say at the event horizon
time & space reverse
(true freedom
from yesterday & tomorrow while always
falling away)*

sounds like your ticket.

Survival

Continued from Page 15

rotation rates and velocities. It's easy to monitor them from the way they flash in the sunlight. I had a half-baked idea that I could extrapolate back to the ground zero of the breakup, and work out a search based on the probability of an object with Du Toit's mass moving at a typical velocity having travelled a certain distance by now. But it's no use — the search volume is still far too big."

"So what *have* you found?"

"It's one of those icebergs. Its rotation is speeding up. At first I thought it might be Du Toit, using his jetpack to increase the spin of the thing, or trying to steer it back to us. But there's no trace of his exhaust plume in the spectrum of the thing, and anyway if he had a working jetpack he could fly right in the front door. Besides, the change is tiny — I'd never have noticed if the computer hadn't flagged it as an anomaly. But it just isn't natural. How can a lump of ice in space start to rotate faster all on its own?"

"I've no idea, Chuck, but we're sure gonna find out. In this universe, if something doesn't seem to be obeying the laws of physics, chances are there's intelligence at work. I only hope it's Du Toit."

She turned back to the board, and flipped the toggle for *Aries II*.

When Xu pulled the fogged helmet off Du Toit's shoulders, he was nearly unconscious. The suit's air conditioning, damaged during the quake, hadn't been able to cope adequately with his recent exertions, and his face was running with sweat. He breathed deeply, opened his eyes and smiled weakly.

"Hi, Mary. I'm glad it's you. But I could've done with you getting the message sooner."

"You big ox, Jan. You had us all worried to death, you know. But we should have guessed that superman was indestructible."

"Indestructible, but crazy." Bertorelli, his smile equally broad, interjected. "Who else would have tried to walk home on a piece of ice floating in space, like some demented logger floating on a Canadian river? When Reese told us that iceberg was spinning up and we drifted over to take a look, I don't know what I expected to see. But it sure wasn't the sight of you running over the horizon like the Seventh Cavalry charging to the rescue."

"Just took a little intellectual effort to work it out." Du Toit, though exhausted, was recovering fast in the oxygen-rich atmosphere of the *Aries II*. "Action and reaction, equal and opposite. Law of conservation of angular momentum. If I push one way to walk around the ice, the ice has to spin the other way to compensate. Faster I walk, more the ice spins. Knew you big brains would understand icebergs don't spin faster by magic, and the shiny surface made a great mirror to signal with. Mary's right — intelligence is the key to survival."

"But not just intelligence," she acknowledged. "If I'd been in your shoes I might have had the idea, but that lump of ice would never have noticed my body mass trying to make it spin up. Survival of the fittest needs brain and brawn, and I'm glad it was you out there, not me."

"C'mon, Jan, we're taking you home." □

The Reversal of Planetary Cooling

Human beings have solved the problem of planetary cooling! Over the past 100 years, they have managed to raise the mean temperature of their planet by .9 degrees Fahrenheit. The decade just ended was the warmest of the past hundred years. Another 8.1 degrees, and they can put an end to this planet's current ice age.

A straight-line projection shows it would take nearly a millennium for them to get this place comfortable. Fortunately, it's not a straight-line projection. Human ingenuity has found ways to accelerate the heating process. I am convinced it will pay off over the next two generations.

They are achieving this improvement in their planet's climate by recreating its original conditions. They have discovered that nature, in creating life forms, has robbed the atmosphere of carbon dioxide. The lack of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere reduces its insulating properties and allows the planet's heat to escape into space.

Since carbon is an essential element of their makeup, all Earth life forms lock the element out of the planet's atmosphere. Increase the number of plants and animals, and you make the atmosphere more pervious to escaping heat. Some Earth trees can lock up their carbon for thousands of years. And the plants and animals that become part of the coal and oil deposits when they die are removing

carbon from the atmosphere permanently.

Fortunately, the human beings have found ways to reverse the process of locking away carbon. They unlock it through combustion. When you burn a tree, for example, you liberate its carbon for other uses. The same is true for coal and oil. Since their first discovery of fire, human beings have been burning everything they could find: grasslands, forests, each other. And just a few generations ago, they began to retrieve coal and oil from the ground and to burn it as well. The theory is simple. When your planet has cooled down because of a lack of insulation in the atmosphere, put the insulation back.

Having discovered the source of the cooling, they have been industrious about reversing it. In the past 100 years, they have managed to increase the amount of carbon dioxide in their atmosphere by 25%, and it now constitutes 0.035% of the whole.

Burning carbon is the simplest and most common way of replacing atmospheric insulation. But they have been at work on other fronts as well. They have isolated any number of gases that are transparent to visible light but opaque to the infrared, which means they have excellent atmospheric insulation quality. Chlorofluorocarbons, for example. Human industry distributes chlorofluorocarbons in aerosol packaging (you will remember seeing a lot of that on television commercials), air con-



ditioning equipment, and the ubiquitous plastic foam, which these creatures use for everything from packing goods in boxes to making disposable coffee cups.

Chlorofluorocarbons are particularly ingenious. They also play a role in reducing the strength of planet's outer ozone layer, making it possible to admit more ultraviolet light to the planet's surface. You know I've always felt these creatures don't get enough radiation, and I guess they agree with me. In addition, human beings have devised ways for packing their atmosphere with nitrogen oxides, methane, and low-level ozone, all of which bolster the insulation process. The result has been an unqualified success. The temperature inches upward every year.

Some spoilsports have pointed out that reducing planetary cooling implies climatic change and could endanger the human species itself. But I know these creatures, and they are unlikely to allow something like extinction to keep them from doing what they believe is right. They will continue the insulation process until they've got sand dunes in Missouri.

They are even working on methods to make the process irreversible, so it can continue without them. These creatures are indefatigable. □

Mene ... Mene ... Tekel ...

Sharecropping again. It's the dentist's fault. I don't usually return to the subject of a previous column, but my friend Henry the Dentist has made a Prophetic Utterance which I think worth your attention.

Henry is a true bookaholic. He seems to read about one science fiction book a day, and to have read just about *everything* in the past. So when he starts to go into withdrawal symptoms, he needs a fix of *new* SF, and he needs it *now*, and as a result he isn't what you and I would regard as very discriminating, for all his distinct tastes and tendency to avoid things which look too Literary.

But he buys a *lot* of SF and is the one person I know who has some sense of what is going on in the field as a whole, because he's read more of the contemporary product than any three average readers. He is therefore enormously useful, a sort of one-man reader poll of the paperback market. And he spoke the Words of Doom.

The circumstance was that he was examining some new SF paperbacks and picked up a brand-new novel by a popular author of predominantly military SF whom I shall tactfully refer to as Quintus Blaster.

So, a new Quintus Blaster novel, clearly labeled as such.

"But did he really write it?" said Henry.

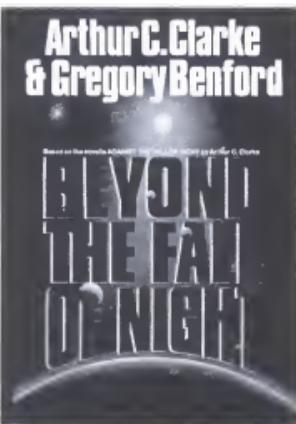
The handwriting is on the wall, folks. The whole industry of sharecropped / franchised / ersatz-brand-name science fiction has reached its terminal stage when a reader like Henry says that.

Rating System

★★★★★	Outstanding
★★★★	Very Good
★★★	Good
★★	Fair
★	Poor

"But did he really write it?"

Quintus Blaster's byline has been used in numerous sharecropping activities, shared-universe anthologies, novels set in the worlds of Quintus Blaster, and even at least one honest anthology of stories from the '50s which, for the most short-sighted of commercial reasons, was designed to look like a sharecropped book even though it wasn't. No doubt about it, the Quintus Blaster byline has been exploited almost as much as that of Arthur C. Clarke or Isaac Asimov.



And now, faced with a brand-new Quintus Blaster novel, Henry the Dentist, the reader who buys almost everything, hesitates and wonders who *really* wrote it. I went through the book myself, suspecting that it might be like a *Philip José Farmer's Dungeon* novel, in which the real author's name is concealed in tiny print somewhere inside. Nope. Even the copyright notice made the Blaster authorship completely clear.

But Henry didn't believe it, and ultimately refused to buy the book. He *would* buy a new Quintus Blaster novel, but he just couldn't be sure that

someone else hadn't been hired to write it under the Blaster brand name.

It seems to me that if enough readers react that way, Quintus Blaster's career is in serious trouble.

Let's not get hysterical, though. There is nothing wicked, depraved, or morally indecent about the mass exploitation of famous bylines, characters, or series. In antiquity, the best way to get your book taken seriously was to attribute it to some former sage. There are a couple of plays in the collected works of Seneca — notably the *Octavia*, the only surviving example of a Roman history play — which were preserved solely because later critics thought they were written by Seneca, although almost certainly they were not. In the Middle Ages there was the Arthurian Mythos, which might be considered the largest shared-universe fantasy of all time. Then there was *Amoris of Gaul*, which spawned dozens, even hundreds of sequels. (But, significantly, none was as good as the original. When Don Quixote does his literary housecleaning, he burns them in vast quantities, but preserves the original.) And by the 19th century literary factory systems were in place. Alexandre Dumas (the Elder) had an army of apprentices working for him, just like a Renaissance painter. Sir Walter Scott took this to such extremes that his friends used to joke, "Have you read your latest novel yet?"

More recently, when he ran out of Lovecraft to publish from Arkham House, August Derleth calmly wrote more, passing the results off, with the slimmest justification, as "posthumous collaborations."

The rationale is quite simple: the famous name or character or series sells. A new book by that name or featuring those characters will automatically sell better than original

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work by a less famous or unknown writer. Therefore, if the publisher can't get enough (say, Quintus Blaster novels) by ordinary means, it can be quite profitable to hire journeyman writers to write them or something that vaguely looks like them: franchise books, phony "collaborations," shared-universe anthologies, anything which will enable the publisher to fill the available rack-space with brand-name material.

As I said, this isn't something we can condemn on moral grounds. If the publisher has some trace of integrity, the resultant product will be labeled at least as honestly as a box of breakfast cereal.

But I think it's terribly shortsighted, and Henry the Dentist inadvertently explained why.

The brand names are being degraded by over-exploitation. They're losing credibility. I am sure that after *Venus Prime* and the two Gentry Lee fiascoes (*Cradle* and *Rama II*) there will always be Henry the Dentists out there who will simply refuse to believe that any future Arthur C. Clarke book is actually by Arthur C. Clarke, no matter what the byline says. This is America, after all. In American commerce, as in politics, we are used to being lied to. So I can well envision the day in which Clarke turns in a new novel, entirely his own work, not his best perhaps, but certainly as good as *Imperial Earth*. The publisher pays a Clarke-sized advance for it. Then the book bombs because all the Henry the Dentists out there refuse to believe it's the real thing.

Sure, the classic Clarke will continue to sell. *Childhood's End* has yet to be besmirched. But with any new Arthur C. Clarke book hereafter, there's going to be some nagging doubt.

As for Quintus Blaster, he's only currently popular. None of his books — the real ones — have become classics yet. Possibly they will, but I think he's reducing his chances by allowing his name to be exploited the way it has been.

It's even gotten to the point where any collaboration between a very senior and very junior writer becomes suspect. Readers brace themselves, waiting for the next book in the series, a "collaboration" with an entirely different junior writer. And the credibility of all involved goes right

down the toilet.

It concerns me directly because I've found a collaborator myself of late. He has a supremely twisted imagination which inspires mine. We work well together, complementing each other's strengths. We are selling the results easily. But my colleague has only one solo story to his credit, so I wonder (only half jokingly) how long before people start whispering that Jason Van Hollander is being hired to write Schweitzer.

Beyond the Fall of Night

By Arthur C. Clarke
and Gregory Benford
Ace/Putnam, 1990

304 pp., \$19.95

Case in point. For all my enormous respect for Gregory Benford, I wish he hadn't done this. He is a major hard-science writer in his own right, fully capable of taking Clarke's place when Arthur is finally transported to that big monolith in the sky, so it's more embarrassing than anything else to see him reduced to the level of a fill-in for Gentry Lee.

This is an unnecessary book. It shouldn't have been published. It does no one involved any good, especially not the publisher, who seems to have less integrity than most in this sort of situation.

The book is not a collaboration in the usual sense. It's just an excuse to put out another "new" Arthur C. Clarke book, to which Clarke seems to have contributed nothing except his permission and a brief introduction. The rest consists of a reprint of *Against the Fall of Night* (the first 18 chapters) plus a new, untitled sequel by Benford (chapters 19-36). Even the copyright page conceals this fact. But, with an old Pyramid paperback in hand, I went through it chapter-by-chapter, comparing the first few paragraphs of each. Apparently the original Clarke text is unaltered, which is cause for some relief.

The Benford sequel is, alas, quite inferior, worthy of neither Clarke nor Benford. Clarke had managed to overcome the entropy-as-inevitable-doom scenario which had been standard in science fiction at the time courtesy of Wells and Stapledon. Yes, millions of years in the future the Earth is worn out and dying, the remnant of our species (or actually a new humanity, rather like one of Stapledon's future

races) sunk into ennui. But there still is a future, beyond the Earth, on planets of younger stars. The original novel ends with a majestic outward thrust of the resurgent mankind into the universe. Clarke rightly ended the book there.

Never mind, says Benford. Well, almost. The Mad Brain is back, wiping out the memory of early mankind, which the immortals of Diaspar seem sluggish to do anything about. Much of the story is told from the viewpoint of Cley, the seemingly sole survivor of Ur-humanity, a human species almost as far back on the evolutionary scale as thee, me, Arthur C. Clarke, and Gregory Benford.

Somehow none of this is very exciting. It is in fact dull. The book lacks texture. Benford is unable to reproduce the magic of Clarke's prose, but instead writes in a flat, sketchy style that would make the Battle of Stalingrad sound like an anecdote. For example, an attack by the Mad Brain:

Blue striations frenzied the air.
The few remaining clouds disipated in a cyclonic churn.

Cley said, "What —"

Sheets of yellow light shot overhead. A wall of sound followed, knocking Cley against Seeker. She found herself facedown among leaves without any memory of getting there.

All around them the forest was crushed, as though something had trampled it in haste. Deep booms faded away.

An eerie silence settled. Cley got up and inspected the wrenched trees, gagging at fumes from a split stinkbush. Two flying foxes lay side by side, as though mated in death. Their glassy eyes were still open and jerked erratically in their narrow, bony heads.

"Their brains still struggle," Seeker said. "But in vain."

"What was that?"

"Like the assault on your people?"

"Yes . . . but this time" — she swept her hand to the horizon of mangled forest — "it smashed everything!"

"Those foxes took the brunt of it for us."

"Yes, poor things . . ." Her voice trailed off as the animals' bright eyes slowed, dimmed, then closed.

(pp. 202-203)

Not my idea of a dramatic scene, or even very good description. The writing is perfectly competent in a line-by-

line sense, but it gives us none of the vivid *experience* that the Clarke novel does. Even though characterization isn't Clarke's strong point either, I found the character of Cley entirely flat, without any inner, emotional life. Without any reader involvement in the characters, the story becomes a sketchy lecture-tour which only serves to remind us, to its detriment, how good the original was — or, for that matter, how good Gregory Benford can be sometimes when writing his own stuff.

I am sure Benford didn't need the money, and his own career is going quite nicely, so he must have done this because he wanted to, out of genuine enthusiasm for the material. But I can't help but regard it as a mistake, from every conceivable aspect.

I would have much rather had a reprint of *Against the Fall of Night* and a brand-new Gregory Benford novel.

Rating: 

Tor SF Double No. 20:
The Pugnacious Peacemaker
By Harry Turtledove
and *The Wheels of If*
By L. Sprague de Camp
Tor, 1990
185 pp., \$3.50

I suppose if we must have sequels and famous classics published in single volumes, this is the way to do it, each author's contribution clearly marked, without any pretense of an overall "collaborative" work. But I wonder, if Tor wanted a book-length version of "The Wheels of If," why didn't they hire de Camp to write it, since he is alive and well and writing at the same level as always?

Never mind. The original "Wheels," published in *Unknown* in 1939, was the prototype for numerous alternate-world stories that followed, particularly those of H. Beam Piper. A man from our universe finds himself quite suddenly in a New York which calls itself New Belfast, where the people speak an odd English which is half Dutch, and the northeastern part of the North American continent is occupied by the nation of Vinland. To the southwest are civilized states descended from Indian tribes, and to the far south, a 20th-century Inca Empire. Some research reveals that this timeline parted from our own at two points in the early Middle Ages: the

Synod of Whitby in 664 decided in favor of the Celtic rather than Roman church, and the Moors won at Tours. Latin Christianity shrank to insignificance under the protection of iconoclastic Byzantium, while Celtic Christianity then spread rapidly over northern Europe, averting the Viking age, whereupon North America was discovered by the Celtic Christian Norsemen and colonized at a medieval level. So the Indians were not swept aside, but pushed back slowly until they learned enough tech-

airplanes) and a clever resolution having to do with whether the Incas can be regarded as People of the Book.

It's diverting. It besmirches nothing. Now, having done this, Turtledove can get on with his own career.

Rating: 

And now, a word about real books:

The Boat of a Million Years
By Poul Anderson
Tor Books, 1989
470 pp., \$19.95

At the last Readercon, I sat next to a friend during the Small Press Awards ceremony. My non-fiction book, *Pathways to Elfland: the Writings of Lord Dunsany*, was nominated. So was *Weird Tales*.

"Are you nervous?" my friend asked.

"No. I don't expect to win."

I then proceeded to tell her what *would* win in all thirteen categories, and got eleven right. I was thrown by the novels (I had read none of them, only heard of one) and Best Interior Illustration (I had not seen the winner).

At the last Nebula banquet I attended, I did the same thing, and got all but one. There is an art to predicting awards. Much of it is putting your personal preferences aside and weighing the factors which decide the awards: exposure, previous track record, current trends, and what might loosely be called "the political situation."

My prediction is that *The Boat of a Million Years* will win the Hugo this year. I nominated *Hyperion* myself, but I think *Boat* will win.

Why? Poul Anderson is an extremely respected senior figure in the field. He has broad appeal. Some of his books are inevitably liked to some degree by *everyone*. Not necessarily the same ones, but there is enough, varied Anderson to go around. And, while he has won numerous short-fiction awards, he has never won for novel, the field's highest honor. He hasn't written a major novel in a while, and now, I think, there is a groundswell of sentiment which will jump at the chance to give him a Hugo for novel. On the negative side, the book is only available in trade hardcover at the



nology and organization from the invaders to hold their own.

Our hero finds himself inhabiting the body of a bishop and caught up in the politics of this new world. Like any de Campian protagonist he is tough, inventive, cheerful, a regular guy only a lot smarter, and he makes the best of things. While the story has no great depth, its clever breeziness and common-sense humanity must have been an enormous relief in the pulp field of the late '30s when many of the writers could hardly write at all. It still reads well.

Turtledove's sequel is a little slower-paced but has a bit more texture (and eerily resembles, not early de Camp, but recent de Camp; a cunning job of pastiching) and takes our hero to South America to avert a war between the Muslim Caliphate and the Incas over the Amazon valley. There are more inventive situations, hairbreadth escapes, and much ado about custom, alternate technology (very de Campian steam-driven

moment. Perhaps a book club or paperback edition between now and the voting deadline will make a difference. But I don't think the exposure problem is serious. A whole generation that grew up on Anderson is now approaching middle age and well able to afford hardcover books. This is the winner.

Incidentally, it's a good book and deserves it.

Despite the spaceship on the cover, *The Boat of a Million Years* is set primarily on Earth, in the historical past. It is the story of naturally produced immortals adventuring throughout the ages, surviving, learning to stay out of sight, slowly contacting one another, and finally taking off into space when they don't fit into a future society of artificial immortals.

This is an ambitious work, which demonstrates all of Anderson's skills. If only one single fragment of his writing were to survive into remote futurity to demonstrate what Poul Anderson was all about, I think the first chapter, the first 19 pages, would do the trick. It's a romantic account of an expedition from Massalia (Marseille) to Britain and Scandinavia in the 4th century B.C., adventurous but idyllic, with only a subtle suggestion of the fantastic when the Phoenician Hanno hints that he has seen the constellations different than they are now. But it does seem to sum up all those science-fiction stories of mankind pushing beyond the horizon, into space and the unknown.

The writing is clear, vivid, and often poetic, only once in a while straining for effect. I confess it took me a minute to figure out that this was a description of the Aurora Borealis:

Above him reached utter clarity, a hue that raised memories of white roses. No more than half a dozen stars could shine through it, tremble, barely seable.

(p.15)

We proceed on, through ancient China, Rome, Byzantium, the newly Islamic Middle East, medieval Russia and Japan, the American Old West, while the immortals adapt in various ways, or don't. There is a profound sense of loneliness and of loss as, of course, everyone an immortal gets involved with inevitably ages and dies. While many novels of immortality have raised this point before, few have done it with such feeling. And Ander-

son avoids the temptation (best demonstrated in Eldridge and Viereck's *My First Two Thousand Years*) of involving his characters in an endless, lurid succession of famous scenes and famous people. When one of Anderson's characters does encounter Cardinal Richelieu, the scene is all the more effective for the restraint.

My one quibble is that not one of these characters seems to hold to a purely supernatural explanation of his difference, for all their original supernatural-believing, even supernatural-obsessed societies. I'd think

one of them would proclaim himself divine and start a religion. You don't suppose ...? Or perhaps Anderson's point is that a few centuries of living must make a person detached and skeptical — or else he or she isn't going to survive that long.

Recommended.

Rating: 

A Romance of the Equator

By Brian W. Aldiss

Atheneum, 1990

347 pp., \$18.95

This is an odd volume which will puzzle many readers. Aldiss's defini-

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tion of "fantasy" is so vague as to mean, in essence, anything the author has imagined. To the rest of us, *A Romance of the Equator* is an uneasy assembly of, yes, fantasy stories, some fables, some science fiction (mostly about the far future), some mainstream, and one capably spooky ghost story.

Some of them are lovely. I am particularly drawn to "Day of the Doomed King," a Borges-like legend of medieval Serbia, which loses none of its effectiveness by having nothing to do with history at all, and to "The Small Stones of Tu Fu," which begins in Tang China but proceeds to the end of time, and has an eeriness worthy of "The Time Machine." The ghost story,

exactly the effect he wants, but I, for one, have no idea why he is doing this. I react to his stories of the far future, "The Worm that Flies," "Old Hundredth," and some of the others, exactly the same way. These are certainly admirable works of the imagination. For once we have a futurity which is different, rather than, say, a standard sword-and-sorcery setting with futuristic details. In fact the stories read like they were produced in that remote era, then faithfully translated into 20th-century English for us to puzzle over. We lack the emotional and cultural referents to actually understand them.

It may even be a matter of American vs. British tastes. I can only guess. I note that Aldiss's *Helliconia* books seem to be the epic of their decade in Britain, as big as *Dune* in sales and influence. But in the United States you can't give them away. My own bookselling experience (admittedly restricted to conventions) tells me that after *Helliconia*, you couldn't give away any Aldiss. But many British readers and critics regard him as the finest living SF writer. All those folks can't be wrong. But I'm not sure they're speaking our language.

Rating:

Noted:

Tales of the Cthulhu Mythos

By H.P. Lovecraft and Divers Hands

Arkham House, 1990
529 pp., \$23.95

Even though the copyright page calls this a first edition, it is a re-edited version of the 1969 Arkham House volume of the same title, with several stories added, a couple dropped, a completely new design, and handsome artwork by J.K. Potter. August Derleth's original (and quite misleading) introduction has been replaced by one by James Turner, Arkham's current editor.

This is pretty much the last word on Cosmic Horrors, whether squamous, rugose, or entirely indescribable. Lovecraft, as Turner points out, came along at the precise moment that Einsteinian physics had suddenly made the comfy, Newtonian universe a lot less comprehensible. Lovecraft wrote of Chaos, in which mankind is but a tiny speck sustained

by his own illusions. The vast and impersonal forces of the Cosmos tended to be personified in nasty, shapeless Things which cared no more about humans than humans do about ants. Gradually Lovecraft moved from an occult approach to a purely science-fictional one, until he became one of the great cosmic visionaries, akin to Stapledon and Wells, though with a smaller body of significant work.

But most of his followers, led by August Derleth, failed to grasp his vision and wrote endless stories best summed up as: reclusive finds forbidden tome; reclusive reads forbidden tome; reclusive is devoured by Things. This new edition is an attempt to remove Derleth's influence, and display Lovecraft's accomplishment as a true myth, a way of looking at existence, rather than as a series of in-jokes.

Of course the in-jokes are there. Some are just silly (Frank Belknap Long's "The Space Eaters") while others are grand (the trilogy in which Bloch kills Lovecraft, Lovecraft kills Bloch, and Bloch wraps it all up). Contributors include the old Arkham/Weird Tales crew, Lovecraft (of course), Derleth, Robert E. Howard, Clark Ashton Smith, Fritz Leiber, and some who might surprise you: Colin Wilson, Joanna Russ, Philip José Farmer, Stephen King, and Richard Lupoff.

Rating:

BRIAN W. ALDISS A ROMANCE OF THE EQUATOR



THE BEST FANTASY STORIES

"North Scanning," is autobiographical, wrought out of the material described in ... *And the Lurid Glare of the Comet*.

But I find that a lot of Aldiss's work leaves me completely cold, as if it's written by an alien whose emotions don't work the same way mine do. Aldiss is never *micromurky*, to use Ben Bova's handy term. You can always tell what is going on, line by line and even scene by scene, but sometimes the point of it all seems elusive. I remember being puzzled by "The Moment of Eclipse" when I read it in *New Worlds* twenty years ago. It might have been my youth. But now, rereading it, I am still bewildered by this lifeless love story of sorts, told in curiously stiff bad-Victorian prose, with lots of exclamation points. Aldiss is a skillful enough writer to achieve

Moving?

If you plan to move, please let us know at least 45 days in advance of the mailing of the next issue of *Aboriginal Science Fiction* to make sure you don't miss any issues.

That may seem awfully far in advance, but it takes about 45 days between the time we ship the mailing labels and the magazine's arrival at your home. For the Nov.-Dec. 1990 issue, we need to know if you are moving by August 15, 1990.

Thanks for your cooperation.

The Fate of the Earth

Earth

By David Brin
Bantam/Spectra, 1990
601 pp., \$19.95

Probably the single hardest task an SF writer can take on is the depiction



of the near future, which must be convincingly changed and yet clearly linked to our own time. David Brin has taken and met this challenge with *Earth*, a suspenseful tale set about 50 years in the future.

In 2038, the Earth's environment is still alive, though not by much. Climate change has resulted in rising seas and contributed to desertification; the ozone layer has become so

thin that unprotected animals are blinded by the ultraviolet radiation; and scientists are trying to save many wild species by constructing protected Arks simulating their natural environment. The world is on its way to having a single government, though individual nations still exist. "Secret" has become a dirty word, and the whole world is linked through an enormous computer network.

Alex Lustig was in charge of an illicit experimental power station using a small black hole, created by the new science of cavitronics, as a power source. The hole is accidentally released into the Earth, and, though theory holds that it will dissipate harmlessly, Alex is not so sure. The team he gathers to help him find out confirms the theory, but discovers something much more frightening: a stable, growing black hole already at the Earth's core, which, if not somehow stopped, will destroy the planet within two years.

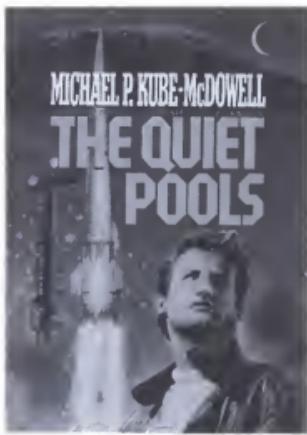
The plot is exciting, and held my attention throughout this very long book. Brin never lets the suspense fade. The romantic subplot is kept to a bare minimum, and there are only occasional small lumps of exposition. The made-up physics convinced me, and the whole thing just works beautifully. Though in some sense a cautionary tale, the book never preaches.

Brin's future is brilliantly credible. In particular, *Earth* contains the most convincing portrayal of what a worldwide computer net will be like that I've seen. His sociology fits together, too, believably extrapolated from trends we can already see today, as well as from the historical events Brin has invented.

The characters are also convincing — I've met people like them — and, from heroes to villain, well rounded. Brin is no stylist, but his writing is competent and unobtrusive, except

for the occasional unnecessary use of an uncommon, multi-syllabic word. There's a "bonus story" at the end of the book which is more a meditation than an actual story; Brin's long afterword is interesting.

From its smallest detail to its star-



ting ending, *Earth* is an impressive achievement. Don't miss it.

Rating: 

The Quiet Pools

By Michael P. Kube-McDowell
Ace, 1990
384 pp., \$17.95

Most science fiction dealing with space travel, mainly because of the predilections of its writers and audience, makes the assumption that the human race, *en masse*, will be all for it. There have always been exceptions, of course, the earliest I can think of being Isaac Asimov's story

Rating System

★ ★ ★ ★	Outstanding
★ ★ ★	Very Good
★ ★	Good
★	Fair
☆	Poor

"Trends." Michael P. Kube-McDowell's new novel, *The Quiet Pools*, is an interesting speculative novel of humanity's step into the interstellar void, and of those who want to keep us at home.

The story is set about 100 years from now, and centers around the Diaspora Project, in which 10,000-person colony ships are being sent off to the stars. As the story opens, final preparations are being made for the *Memphis*, the second of what are to be five such ships. However, there is a growing movement to stop the Project, stop the "theft" of humanity's best and brightest, a movement created and fueled by Jeremiah, the unknown leader of an eco-terrorist group called the Homeworld. Kube-

author's explanation. Compare this to the treatment of line marriages in Heinlein's *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, where the author gives us enough details to believe in their existence but avoids a history lecture.

Sociobiology—the theory that much of our behavior is determined by our genes—is a central element in the plot. It's certainly a valid speculative idea, though risky for an author because of the bitter controversy engendered by it. Though I am not a true believer, that didn't stop me from enjoying the story even while arguing with it, and the ending won me over. While the sociobiological speculations work well on the larger scale, they were less successful for me when the author applied them to interpersonal relationships; I found the sex-related aspects of the theory, as interpreted by the author, unconvincing.

The writing is clear and suspenseful, although the sex scenes are a bit lifeless. Christopher's psychotherapy sessions ring true. The plot of the novel is exciting and believable, with the one nagging flaw that I never understood what Allied Transcon—the private company running the Diaspora Project—gets out of it, with the huge expenses and no foreseeable return.

The characters are all solid, distinctive, and believable, although Sasaki remains an enigma, her personality a blank, since she is made the embodiment of the Diaspora Project, rather than an individual. Christopher McCutcheon, however, satisfactorily embodies the whole human race without changing from a human into an archetype.

Overall, *The Quiet Pools* is a successful, fascinating novel that will leave you much to think about. It places Kube-McDowell solidly among the field's important contemporary authors.

Rating: 

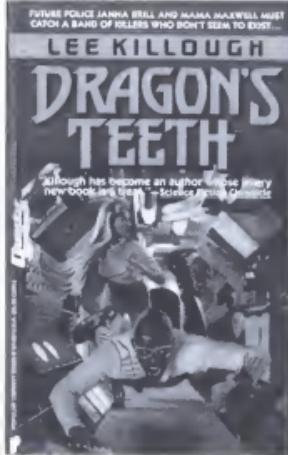
Dragon's Teeth
By Lee Killough
Popular Library/Questar, 1990
250 pp., \$4.95

As those who have been reading this column for a while will have noticed, I have a penchant for science fictional mysteries, so I picked up Lee Killough's *Dragon's Teeth* anticipating an enjoyable read. Unfortunately,

this futuristic police procedural isn't nearly as good as it ought to be.

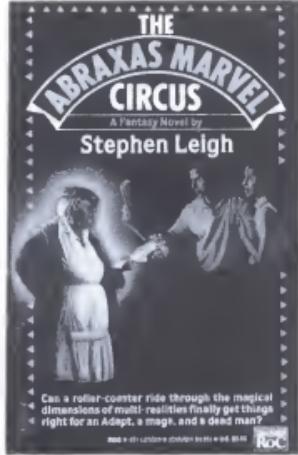
It's about a hundred years from now, and Janna Brill and her partner, "Mama" Maxwell (a man, despite his nickname), are cops assigned to investigate the murder, in the course of a robbery, of a prominent businessman. The problem is that no one can figure out how the gang of robbers got in and out of the murder site without being seen. Brill and Maxwell must track down the motive while trying to figure out the riddle.

I don't make any particular effort to solve mysteries as I read them, and I rarely outthink the sleuths. In *Dragon's Teeth*, however, I spotted the McGuffin—the central gimmick of the murder method—within a few



McDowell follows the stories of several people who are linked to the Project: Christopher McCutcheon, a librarian working on the ship's hyperlibrary; Mikhail Dryke, chief security officer of the Project; Hiroko Sasaki, head of the Project; and Malena Graham, a therapist selected for the *Memphis* colony.

Kube-McDowell has done a generally good job on this future. It feels lived in, and, with one exception, is understandable without the use of expository lumps. That exception is a several-page lecture on the origin and social development of the group marriages that figure in the plot. Not only does this lecture leap indigestibly out of the story, but I found the political history given simplistic and unlikely, so that this important cultural change became less credible for me after the



chapters, but the cops didn't think of it until nearly the end of the book. I spent most of the book wanting to yell at them for being so obtuse.

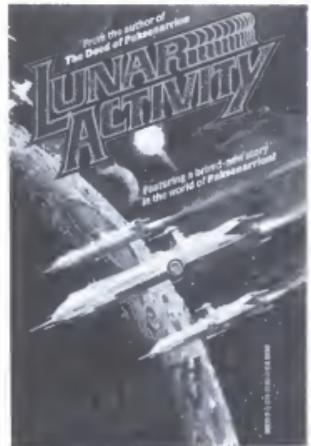
Killough paints her unusual characters, like Mama, with bold strokes, but the less odd ones fade into the background. Janna, despite being the viewpoint character, is a cipher; Killough's attempt to graft a personality onto her by having Mama lecture her on what's wrong with her life doesn't work, since it's not supported by anything else in the story. I'm also bothered that every step in solving the crime comes from Mama; Janna functions more as a Watson than as a competent cop.

Killough's future technology and society are fine, and for the most part her future slang is well integrated. However, I'm not sure I believe "leo"

Sebastian, a new apprentice to aquatic alchemist Corwyn, must help him find the source of the epidemic.

Clark sometimes strains too hard to get a laugh: the silly place names (like the town of Pomme de Terre) and character names don't add much, and I got very tired of the repeated jokes about Sebastian's inadequacy at the French language (one running gag would be okay, but the author keeps repeating it with different words). I love the details of aquatic alchemy, the science Clark invents — or cribbs from modern sewer technology — is funny and almost believable. The novel also contains the best unicorn I've seen in a while.

Sometimes the characters don't think like real medieval people, but seem to stand outside their society



and observe it the way we would. This is all right for the wizardly Corwyn, but not for Sebastian, who is very dense, in an amusingly frustrating way. Clark vastly oversimplifies the end of the Middle Ages as they give way to the Renaissance, which nagged at me a little, but this is a humorous fantasy, after all, not a serious historical novel.

Alchemy Unlimited is an engaging and unusual light fantasy, whose main flaw is sometimes overly broad humor. There's a hint at the end that there will be more adventures of Corwyn and Sebastian, and I'll certainly read them.

Rating: ★☆☆

Lunar Activity
By Elizabeth Moon

Baen, 1990
278 pp., \$3.50

Elizabeth Moon has gained some prominence in the past few years for her fantasy trilogy, *The Deed of Paksenarrion*. I have not read it, but having heard raves about it from people whose taste I trust, I picked up her new short story collection, *Lunar Activity*, with anticipation. While enjoyable, it is not as impressive as Moon's reputation had led me to hope.

The collected stories are primarily science fiction, not fantasy. Most of them were originally published in *Analogs*, and they tend to have the flaws often found in *Analogs* stories: an overfascination with the nuts and bolts, a tendency toward awkward expository lumps, and, in at least one case, the setting up of a straw man to knock down. That story — "Gut Feelings" — is a lovely tale of character and place, but if Moon had made her opponents more reasonable and credible — e.g., people concerned about abuses of genetic engineering, rather than completely irrational animal-rights activists — it would have been much stronger.

Regarding lumps: In "A Delicate Adjustment," a character who has just been given some devastating news proceeds to spend a page and half thinking through all the legal and societal changes that have led up to his problem. Right. It's an interesting story, if ultimately unsuccessful.

I liked "Gut Feelings" except for the horrendous title and the problem mentioned above; Moon has done excellent work with setting and character. "Gravesite Revisited," a time-travel story, has a valid point to make about our difficulties getting into the heads of our distant ancestors, but the plot itself defies belief.

"If Nudity Offends You" is very different from the pieces surrounding it, a character study with little plot and only the barest science-fictional content, and it works. "New World Symphony" is a fine SF story with good characterization and a successfully ambiguous resolution. "Those Who Walk in Darkness," which is set in the universe of the Paksenarrion books, confused me since I haven't read them; it took me a long time to understand what was going on, and some things remained unclear to me even at the end. It is well written, though,

and intriguing enough to encourage me to search out the trilogy.

The hard, rivets-oriented SF in this collection is only middling, but some of the other pieces reveal Moon's talent. Though very uneven, the collection is worth seeking out.

Rating: ★☆☆+

Call of Madness
By Julie Dean Smith
Del Rey, 1990
311 pp., \$4.95

Despite appearances, Julie Dean Smith's first novel, *Call of Madness*, is not a generic, dime-a-dozen fantasy. It is an entertaining novel with some original twists — no important artistic achievement, but a good job.

In the kingdom of Caith, magic



power is regarded as a curse, with good reason, since those who develop it inevitably descend into destructive, homicidal madness. As soon as someone displays signs of magic, he or she is ritually slaughtered by the church and thus "saved." Athaya is an unhappy princess of Caith who must confront the truth about magic and the growing signs of her own power, all the while her father, the king, who was given magic powers in a forbidden ritual, slides toward his own madness.

The setting of the novel is nothing unusual, but Smith depicts it well. There are not enough interesting details of the setting, though. I like the use of religion by both heroes and villains, as well as the sincerity of both sides. The main characters are

very well drawn, except in one instance: Durek, the king's eldest son, whose reasons for acting as he does are all but absent, and who thus becomes a cartoon villain.

The plot kept my attention, although I saw most of the author's surprises coming, and not just because I read the cover blurb. Smith's writing is generally fine, despite occasional clunkiness. Although it seems to be the first book of a series, the plot resolves satisfactorily.

Smith's flashes of originality lift *Call of Madness* above the mediocre ranks of look-alike fantasies. I hope she continues to develop and improve her evident talent.

Rating: ★☆☆+

Can Such Things Be?

By Ambrose Bierce
Citadel Twilight, 1990
160 pp., \$6.95

Ambrose Bierce was an influential American columnist of the late 19th century, who is best known today for his cynical *Devil's Dictionary*. He was also a writer of supernatural fiction, much of which is included in Citadel's new reprint collection. The collection contains many of them. There are a few fine stories here, and the book is worth reading, though most of the fiction is of mainly historical interest.

In general the stories are very short, which increases their impact. Most are fairly standard ghost stories, though the plots were probably more unexpected when they were originally published; now they lead more to yawns than to chills.

There are a few stand-outs, though: "Moxon's Master," an odd science-fictional tale; "One Summer Night," which has a wonderful first sentence: "The fact that Henry Armstrong was buried did not seem to him to prove that he was dead: he had always been a hard man to convince.>"; "A Resumed Identity," which plays with our own perception of who we are; and "Haïta the Shepherd," an effective fable about the pursuit of happiness.

The stories contain many wickedly pointed turns of phrase and descriptions that display the cynical wit Bierce was noted for. The collection is at least worth browsing in, especially if you have an interest in the history of horror and supernatural fiction.

Rating: ★☆☆+

Borgel

By Daniel Pinkwater
Macmillan, 1990
170 pp., \$12.95

Daniel Pinkwater's new young adult novel, *Borgel*, is as indescribable as his work usually is. Take one boy named Melvin and his mysterious "Uncle" Borgel, throw in an Anthropoid Bloboform, a 1937 Dobzeldge, and the Great Popsicle, sprinkle with Chef Chow's Hot and Spicy Oil, and you have an irresistible dish. This story of spacetime travel has some hilarious moments, with the high point being Borgel's fractured fables. Pinkwater loses control a bit toward the end, but it all wraps up and even makes a kind of sense. I was disappointed that Pinkwater hadn't illustrated the book in his inimitable style, but other than that I was delighted. Buy it for a young adult you love, buy it for yourself, but buy it.

Rating: ★☆☆+

Sung in Blood

By Glen Cook
NESFA Press, 1990
161 pp., \$15.00

Glen Cook's short fantasy novel *Sung in Blood*, brought out in a limited edition by NESFA Press, made me very angry when it ended in the middle of the story. The last two sentences: "What was needed now was the passing of time. It would be a

time shorter than any of them imagined." It is obviously part of a longer work, and it should not have been published as it is without some warning. I expect this sort of thing from commercial publishers, but not from a place like NESFA Press. Be warned.

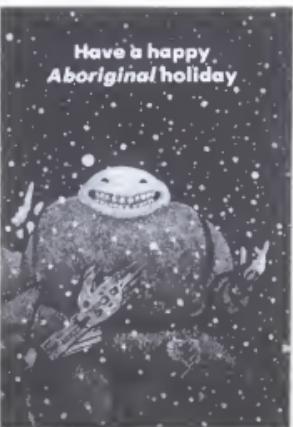
The story itself is a bizarre mixture of wizardry, technology, and the Yellow Peril. It's an interesting world and I'd like to see more of it; I particularly liked the demon-powered airships. The characters are stereotypes: the strong, wise, fearless leader; the strong but stupid barbarians; the vague wizard; the evil dwarf sorcerer; the evil Oriental villain; the proud, beautiful slave girl. The world is so unusual that it's a shame the characters don't live up to it; they're just pieces of prefab cardboard moved around in front of gorgeous sets.

Cook's style shifts uneasily between "fantasy" (elaborate, archaic style) and modern style. The plot is exciting, with lots of action, but the heroes get in trouble too many times as a result of sheer stupidity. If they were always as stupid as they are in the course of this book, they'd be dead already.

Despite the problems, I enjoyed it up until the abrupt "see you next time" ending. Unfortunately, that ending forces me to downgrade its rating and makes me unable to recommend it.

Rating: ★☆☆+

Aboriginal Holiday Postcards



Now is your chance to get special *Aboriginal Science Fiction* holiday postcards in time to send to all your friends and relatives.

The postcards are based on an illustration by *Aboriginal* regular Larry Blamire for Esther M. Friesner's story "The Doo-Wop Never Dies" from our Nov.-Dec. 1989 issue.

The postcards are 50-cents each; or \$4.50 for 10; or \$8.00 for 20, plus postage. Postage is 25-cents for one postcard; \$1.00 for 10; and \$2.00 for 20.

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Leaving the West Indies?



When Christopher Columbus left Queen Isabella of Spain in 1492, he set out on a westerly course for India where he hoped to make a killing in the spice market. He was going to fool the competition by taking the shortcut *around* the world rather than having to go all the way down to the southern tip of Africa, with its notoriously bad weather, and then back up to India. That he ended up in America is history, but it goes to show how those with good intentions often end up someplace other than where they had planned.

So, too, we voyaged with the last issue into a different sea of paper based on the charts and compass guides supplied by a new printer. I'm not quite sure where we ended up, but I do know it was just about as far short of where we thought we were going as poor old Columbus. We weren't at all happy with the crookedly bound pages and flat-looking color reproduction.

This issue, we hope (fingers crossed), is more like what we had in mind. In fact, if it really does turn out as we hope, rather than someplace in the West Indies, it may well be the ideal compromise between the lower cost of uncoated paper and the high-quality reproduction capability of more expensive coated stock.

This paper should be whiter

than ordinary newsprint, but it is also specially treated so that it can capture high-density color printing nearly as well as coated stock. Theoretically, at least, the art should look like it's on glossy paper, the text like it's on newsprint. Something for everyone. If not, we'll tinker with it some more. After all, NASA took quite a while before it safely launched a frightened chimp into space.

We have started making some inroads gaining advertising from publishers, though we still don't have nearly as much as the larger magazines. Patience, one supposes, is in order.

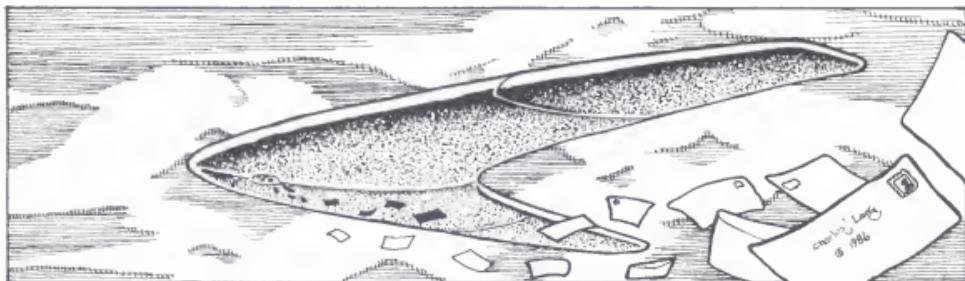
Thanks to all those who chipped in to keep the magazine protected by baggies. And special thanks to those who chipped in extra, assuming some would not do their "fair share." For those who feel plastic is a violation of the environment, I suggest that they look at some of the recent findings. Seems that 50-year-old newspapers dug from the bottom of a landfill in the western part of the country had failed to decompose. Which means all those digest SF magazines buried in the good old days weren't quite as biodegradable as everyone supposed. That's why facts are always better than feelings; they let one make informed decisions. So we don't use heavy paper wrapping because it isn't any cheaper, doesn't biodegrade any

faster than plastic in the real world when it's buried under a ton of fill, and doesn't protect the magazine as well, particularly from rain and snow. Besides, we ought to recycle materials and eliminate landfills.

So, until a better solution comes along, we'll stay with the baggies as long as we can afford them. (Toward that end, if you are one of those who haven't sent a baggie donation of 20-cents per copy, please do.) Another benefit of the new printer for this issue is that they say they can put the labels on the baggie, rather than on the magazine, which should please collectors. Let's hope we don't have to talk about printing again for a long, long time.

Talking about voyages, we are preparing now for the World Science Fiction Convention at The Hague in Holland. This will mark the first time *Aboriginal* will visit the Old World, in a reversal of Columbus's trip when he discovered the aborigines of the West Indies and Florida.

We hope our aborigine gets a little better long term reception from the Europeans than those of Columbus's time did. We're hoping that the introductions go smoothly and that we start picking up as many readers over there as we have here ... though that will probably take a while and more than one convention visit. □



Dear Darrell,

Just read your rave review of Dan Simmons' science fiction novel *Hyperion* and would like to clarify a few things.

Simmons has not "recently switched" to sf. He's been writing sf all along. *Omni* published his story "Eyes I Dare Not Meet in Dreams" in 1982. This story was sent to me with the highest recommendations from Harlan Ellison and Ed Bryant. It was Simmons' first sale. *Twilight Zone* decided to buy "The River Styx Runs Upstream" right around the same time and asked if they could publish first so that Simmons' eligibility for the TZ contest wouldn't be forfeit. I agreed. After that, Dan published a few more sf stories (along with the horror story "Carrión Comfort" *Omni* Sept./Oct. '83) in *Omni* and *Asimov's* (including what became the novel *Hyperion*, I believe).

Finally, *Phases of Gravity* is a wonderful mainstream novel about a former astronaut in India. It is not a science fiction novel.

Ellen Datlow

Fiction Editor

Omni

(Actually, Ellen, Dan's first sale in 1979 was an sf short story to Charles C. Ryan, then editor of *Galileo*, but *Galileo* folded before the story could be published. — Ed.)

Dear *Aboriginal*:

With respect to Mr. Dudenhofer's letter published in Jan-Feb 1990, in which he recommends a letter-writing campaign to name the first US space station *Heinlein*, I am a great fan of Heinlein's and would rejoice. His "Delilah and the Space Rigger," and "Blowups Happen," for example, occupy honored places in space-station

lore. But I think there might be more appropriate memorials for Heinlein and also a more appropriate name for the new NASA space station.

The concept of a space station started, as far as I am aware, with Everett Hale's *Atlantic Monthly* story, "The Brick Moon," in the late 1800s. It was brought surprisingly close to its modern form in the writings of Tsiolkovsky around the turn of the century. George O. Smith's *Venus Equilateral* certainly deserves mention, and in our own day, C.J. Cherryh's insights (and Joan Vinge's in *Heaven's Belt*) that interstellar colonization will not necessarily be planet-bound. Also, no one should forget Willy Ley's patient education of two generations of would-be space pioneers, nor that of his successors O'Neill, Stine, and Heppenheimer.

But the greatest contribution in my mind, in both fiction and non-fiction, clearly belongs to Arthur C. Clarke. *The Exploration of Space* and its sequels may have almost single-handedly linked the resources of Western economies to space. *Islands in the Sky* inspired a generation of engineers, and *The Other Side of the Sky* did the same for their older brothers and sisters. In 2001 we got a realistic look at a space station, a design which will hold up well as the zero-gee fantasies give way to biological reality.

If I had but one station in the English-speaking universe to name, I would name it Clarke Station, with no apologies to anyone. Wouldn't it be nice if our country could somehow make amends for the tragedy of Willy Ley's death before the first moon landing by doing this, both the name and the station, while Dr. Clarke still lives?

Sincerely,
Gerald D. Nordley
Boron, CA

Dear Charlie,

It is certainly foolish for advertisers to neglect *Aboriginal SF*. Don't they realize that your readers are extremely rich, in the \$70,000-200,000 income category? (Not to mention what we've inherited.) Please inform them that we drink and smoke heavily, and are shopping for cars to fill our five-stall garages — hard to do, given our tendency to misplace our old vehicles at one party or another. We are also trying hard to lose weight and smell better, and are willing to spend any amount of money to be attractive to one and/or the other sex. We need great quantities of non-prescription medication.

Many of us still don't have stereo, video, and computer systems in every room, which is something for those industries to think about. Nevertheless, our TVs are programmed to blank out commercials, and we prefer abstruse academic journals to newspapers, so your magazine is about the only way to get our attention.

Yours,

Philip C. Jennings
St. Cloud, MN

Dear Charles C. Ryan & Co.,

I recently received *Aboriginal* No. 20 (March/April 1990) in the mail, unprotected by the usual "baggie." Much to my dismay, it arrived looking as though a shoggoth had munched it! The back cover and several rear pages were thoroughly chewed along one edge, affecting my appreciation of Larry Blamire's excellent art for "Ride 'Em, Cyboy" (my favorite story this

issue!) and generally messing up a most collectable magazine.

A friend here in Denver — whom I convinced to subscribe to *Aboriginal* — received her copy with a shredded front cover. More wonderful art ruined. Given the tender mercies of the post office, I can't imagine this was an isolated incident. The magazine's full-color, full-slick cover was never designed for such abuse.

After reading your honest and informative Editor's Notes, I understand why certain economies are necessary — but please, don't discontinue the baggies! Even the best full-color art can't be appreciated if the issue arrives as cosmic confetti, and we subscribers (my sub runs until issue No. 50) shouldn't have to suffer for our long-term support of the magazine.

Yes, I do care about *Aboriginal's* unique artwork. However, I'd rather see a few more pages of newsprint per issue — or a small increase in subscription prices — than a mangled magazine. (In this latest issue, one more four-page section of newsprint would not have affected any art.)

Best wishes for *Aboriginal's* continued survival, and thanks for being honest with us. I'm with you all the way ... but please, protect our subscription issues!

Ad astra,

Ann K. Schwader
Denver, CO

Dear Mr. Ryan:

I am writing in response to your column, Editor's Notes, in the March-April 1990 issue of your magazine.

Yours is the only science fiction magazine I have found worth subscribing to and I am sorry to hear that you are having financial problems that might affect its viability. I hope that my comments will help you in your decisions concerning the continued publication of your magazine.

I very much enjoy the entire concept and presentation of *Aboriginal Science Fiction* and understand how you would be loath to have to change it. However, I buy the magazine for the stories. I enjoy the full-color art and would like to see it kept if it is financially possible, but the art and the other parts are lagniappe for me. I would much prefer "plain newsprint throughout with black and white art" rather than have no magazine. Please do what is necessary to survive now so that your magazine can be around to

accomplish your ultimate goals in the future.

Thank you for your magazine.

Alex Vasauskas

Palmer, AK

(The baggies are back, and with this issue we think we've found a good printing compromise which lets text and art get their best exposure. See the Editor's Note in this issue. — Ed.)

Dear Mr. Ryan:

In response to your editor's notes in the March-April 1990 issue, OF COURSE I CARE ABOUT THE FULL-COLOR ART!

The art is part of the wonder of the magazine. I admit, I don't always like the work, but I'm always fascinated by it and I would miss the full color — a lot.

However, the art comes second to the quality of the stories and non-fiction — no matter what kind of paper they're on. If it becomes necessary to drop the full color for a while, then so be it, as long as *Aboriginal* keeps going. Your magazine is the best thing to come out in years and if quality counts for anything, it will make it.

The most important thing to me about *Aboriginal* is its originality. Sure, there's been a few stories here and there that went completely over my head and a few I actively disliked, but I can't remember ever reading one and asking the fatal question "So what?" That may sound pedestrian, but that's how I judge fiction. The art, whether I like it or not, is different, and that's important to me, too.

Anyway, I'll vote with another subscription renewal — maybe it'll help to finance an O-ring, or just let you know I'm listening.

Sincerely,
Laura Mosman
Lebanon, OR

Dear Mr. Ryan,

If at all possible keep the color art, no black and white art. This is one of the reasons I subscribe to *Aboriginal*. Other SF magazines do not carry the full-color art inside their pages, and that is what makes *Aboriginal* different and exciting from the others.

If it is ever possible, bring back the plastic covers for your magazine. It protects the magazine from the rigors of mailing and I enjoyed that.

Most of all, keep up the good work.

Mark V. Kudas
St. Peters, MO

Dear Mr. Ryan,

I feel compelled to write and let you know how I feel about "our" magazine. I was disappointed to see the changes in the March-April issue, but I can understand the need and will continue to read and support your efforts. I think you produce the finest magazine of the field. The color art is important to me. I hope it does not become necessary to eliminate it. Being the "new kid" is always difficult, but it is always compounded when the new kid has much more to offer than any of the old gang.

One of these days — soon, I hope — the advertisements will begin to appear as you hope. Until then, hang in there. You have many loyal readers who will put up with a few "inconveniences" to see the magazine continue.

I subscribe because of the quality, writing, artwork, size, the whole format. Don't give up your dream. It is shared by too many of us to see it die.

Awaiting anxiously for the next issue,

Bonnie Boyd
Lansing, MI

Dear Mr. Ryan:

I hate the art! Actually I have a hard time thinking of it as art at all. Rembrandt and Monet produced art. These pictures are illustrations. For the most part they seem also to be caricatures. I try hard not to look at them for longer than necessary, as they severely interfere with my own imagination, which works very well without outside "help." Black and white illustrations would be marginally preferable, but really it is the stories which are important.

Regarding the paper — glossy or newsprint. Again, it is the stories which are important, the kind of paper used is immaterial to me. Face it, none of it is going to be around in 100 years anyhow. Seems to be a rule of our culture — if you want it to biodegrade, it won't, if you don't want it to, it will!

So, from my point of view, just keep the stories coming. I don't always like them all, but that doesn't bother me. I don't expect to, I read them anyway. You can't please everyone all the time. Just continue to publish the magazine any way you can.

Sincerely,
Isobel Hubbard
Winter Haven, FL

Jet-Dancer

Continued from Page 5

IN JUST A FEW MONTHS.
ALL MY LOVE, LYRAE.
END

She dropped eight coins in the billing slot after the terminal flashed her cost on the screen. Transmission ended, the machine pumped out her hard copy and she took it back upstairs to help herself feel miserable. Never in her life had she felt so lonely, even after her mother had died. She thought of her mother, wasting away on that miserable asteroid as the constant rock dust slowly plugged her lungs. Mommy, your little girl will be a ballerina. But it's so hard.

She decided to cry herself to sleep. Lyrae rolled onto her side, tears flowing freely now, and let the sobs come. She didn't see the shadow move in front of her door, blocking the dim hall light and staying there a moment. The knock on the door startled her, and then there was a familiar voice. "Lyrae, are you ill? I can hear you crying."

She wiped her eyes dry, and went to the door, opening it slowly. Paul Duchat stood in the dim light, a frown on his thin face, a single red rose in one long hand. He thrust the flower at her. "You shouldn't be alone when you're sad," he said fiercely. "Have coffee with me, and let Paris make you happy again."

She took the rose and sniffed at it, smiling because Paul's serious expression was so out of character for him. He was the class clown, and a better than average dancer, always making people laugh and keeping things light when Lucille went on one of her tirades. "It's very late, and we have class tomorrow," she protested.

"You work too hard. Look at you, practically wasting away." Suddenly he reached out to grasp her waist with both hands, lifting her dramatically over his head at arm's length. She gasped, putting her hands on his shoulders and feeling the knots of muscle there. He put her down quickly, then cupped her chin in one hand. "Come, now. A strong coffee, and an enormous cheesecake to make you fat. You must have some fun."

Lyrae looked back into her darkened room and the rumpled bed soaked in tears, felt the ache in her heart, and said "I'll need my jacket."

Later that night, after Paul had made love to her, she was angry at herself for being so selfish. But for the moment, at least, she was happy.

Auditions were only a week away, and Lyrae could barely get out of bed in the morning. She lived in constant pain, every muscle and sinew in her body screaming for relief, her feet a gnarled mass of calloused tissue with new, bloody surfaces coming to life each day. The feet were bearable; it was a problem every dancer expected and knew how to treat in a variety of ways. But the joints! All connective tissue in her body seemed constantly in flame, and deep within both knees little things were moving that shouldn't have been moving, making creaking sounds when she walked. On one occasion, lifting off on a grande *jeté* after four continuous hours of rehearsal, she made a loud popping sound that brought her back to earth in tears while everyone in the company stopped in amazement and they had to start all over.

Jet-Dancer

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again. Late that night, her right knee was the size of a mutant cabbage, and she went without sleep to keep it soaked in hot cloths. The following morning the thing was still swollen, and thereafter she kept it tightly bandaged. The pain continued.

Lucille was watching her closely now, and it frightened her, for injury could be the kiss of death to a dancer. Even though the older woman had by now become quite fond of her, Lyrae knew it was a condescending thing, even as she knew she had no real talent or native stamina to fall back on when hurt. She must work, work, work to discipline her spacer's body to new heights. The body, she reasoned, must follow the will. The body disagreed.

Paul was not helping matters. Ever since that one night, he was constantly after her, and then the word mysteriously got around about his conquest of the little space nymph and one of the girls came to Lyrae to warn her dear Paul screwed half the company, both boys and girls. After that she wouldn't go anywhere with him, but he persisted. And so it was that he followed her home after a late class one night when she planned a video call to Nate. Her written transmissions to him had been regular at weekly intervals, all answered the following day in Nate's usual brief style. The things she wanted to hear were all there: he was busy writing music for her, he loved her, he wanted her to come home soon.

Dear Lucille had loaned her a charge card. She found a booth near her apartment, looked up the sector code correlation number for the station, and punched it in with the local time and the card number. Economy call was one minute each way, message multiplexed with twenty second delays at times initiated by pressing a button at her end of the line, so the return message would be a continuous thing after the thirty-minute travel time through wires, relays, and a round trip to the asteroid belt. She looked at the blank screen and tried to imagine his face there, bony and fragile-looking. The screen flashed BEGIN TRANSMISSION, and tears welled up in Lyrae's eyes as she leaned forward, nearly sobbing.

"Oh Nate, I love you so much, and I miss you. I don't know whether I can make it here or not. I hurt all over, all the time. It's my joints, Nate. They can't seem to take the pounding, as much as I try to strengthen the muscles around them. Lucille thinks I'm developing a pre-arthritis condition that could get a lot worse, and there's no cure for it. All this work, and auditions are only a few days off. I have to make it, Nate; I just have to..."

Now she was crying.

"Lucille says I'm a good dancer, Nate, and I'll get better if my body holds out. She says my body is right for it: long legs and neck, and a small head. It's just that things seem to keep breaking inside of me. If I have to come back now..."

The door to the telebooth flew open, and Paul was standing there, grinning at her in a frightening way. As she turned towards him, in full view of the screen, he leaned over and kissed her hard, Adam's apple working as he thrust his tongue far into her mouth, withdrawing it before she had a chance to bite down. "Baby-doll!" he shouted, "Come back to bed. I miss you!" And then he turned to face the screen. "Hi, guy," he said, then backed out of the booth and fled cackling into the night.

Lyrae turned back to the screen, glancing at the time monitor. Five seconds left. "That's the most horrible man

I've ever met! Paul's in my class, always playing horrible jokes on people, and you never can take him seriously. He's..."

"END OF TRANSMISSION," said the screen. "REPLY IN THIRTY MINUTES."

It was, for Lyrae, a half-hour in hell.

What could she tell him? Why would he believe her, anyway? Why should he, after what she'd done, betraying his love in a weak moment? She thought of ways to tell him what had happened, and then suddenly his smiling face was on the screen, and the time monitor was running

"God, it's good to see your face again. I ache to hold you, but it helps to keep busy, and I haven't been getting much sleep either. Get your rest — and eat, eat. You're a shadow; it scares me. I've written a symphony for you, Lyrae, and it will tell you more than my words here what I feel for you. You remember Allesandra's "Troika"? He based that on some really old music by Stravinsky. I went back to the original scores, and came up with something new I feel really good about. Now I'm working on the choreography, trying to visualize you doing it, but it's difficult. I need you here, Lyrae, and your body is telling you to come back. Listen to it, and do what you —"

Nate's body jerked upright as if struck from behind. His face flushed red and his mouth was working, but nothing came for several agonizing seconds before he shuddered again, face melting into an angry mask as his hand reached for the screen.

"Noooo!" shouted Lyrae, but the screen went blank except for a rapidly shrinking point of light at its center, Nate disappearing with it.

She cried. She pounded on the console with both hands until people gathered around the booth to watch her, and then she fled through mist to reach her garret, the darkness, the hard bed, the smell of stale tobacco smoke and onions to suffocate her tears.

She cried all night, dragging herself to class the next morning only to hurt her knee again and spend most of the day in the whirlpool.

For the next five days she danced in pain, spending her evenings sending transmissions that went unanswered. Little sleep came, and she forgot to eat, grabbing something sweet when dizziness was upon her. The morning of the audition she danced by instincts alone, looking drawn and haggard, and exactly forty-five beats into Pizzaro's "Ascension" it was as if someone had pulled a supportive pin out of the knee joint in her right leg. She crashed in a heap on the stage, bloodying her forehead, and Lucille herself carried her backstage, screaming for a physician. She knew the verdict before it came: she would never dance again without the risk of being crippled. Lucille came to cry with her, trying to console, failing, finally blurting out her own misery. "You are so lovely, but so delicate on the stage. It's in your heritage, Lyrae, and the way you've grown up — in space. It's not technique, or presence, only strength. I can't help you anymore, little bird. Fly back to your own world, and dance there. Surely there is opportunity. I'll come for your first performance, to see how much of me is a part of you. Yes?"

But Lyrae could only sob, mourning the loss of a vision. She would later recall it as the low point of her entire life, a time of purging, the death of dreams, with a sense of finality that turned her subconscious in a new direction.

towards a destiny nearly ready for her. On the foggy morning she left for the airport, the entire company except Paul was there to hug her good-bye and tearfully wish her well. Her mind remained numb during the taxi ride to catch the X-75-mounted shuttlecraft to the United Nations Station and the transfer to the L-5 station-bound ferry. There she expected to get a compartment in the company fusion-powered freighter back to Hanson's planet, but when she got to the Anaconda-Toshiro offices she discovered they had put her on a faster, lighter vehicle bound for the corporate offices on Mars. Her requests for an explanation were politely denied. Officially, she was reassigned to corporate headquarters, and that was the end of it. A Jet-Dancer — with a bunch of executives? No matter, she decided. Nate was gone, and she would never be played again in that stupid web, not after experiencing the real thing. At least she had that — and Lucille to write to.

She went to Mars.

And saw what had happened there.

About half a million folks here, now," the cabby told her. Lyrae winced as he steered around the tops of huge domes at four hundred feet, darting between streams of traffic and chewing on a huge cigar. "Prices goin' up all the time. Gettin' hard for workers to live here, unless they're workin' for the company. Lots of money. Yessir, lots of money. You a transfer?"

"I guess so. I didn't even know I was coming here."

"That sounds like the company. What d'ya do?"

"I was a Jet-Dancer, but I don't do that anymore. I don't know what they want me for."

The cabby looked at her in his rearview mirror. "Cheer up, kid, you'll know pretty soon. Corporate office just ahead."

They were descending to a landing pad at the top of a green dome dominating all the others. As they drew closer she could see hundreds of tiny windows, and faces.

And then she saw Nate.

He was on the landing pad, looking up at her. Suddenly her chest hurt, and she wanted to run. But where? The cab landed, and Nate opened the door for her, but she couldn't look at him when she got out, and stared at her feet. Then she felt his hand on her shoulder.

"If you tell me to get lost, I'll understand. I didn't know I could be so jealous, like I owned you or something. But I felt so hurt, and my pride took over when you explained things. When I finally did answer you'd already left, and I had to get here in time to get things set up. Forgive me, Lyrae."

The cab took off, its driver grinning, and dust swirled around them. Lyrae reached out her arms to Nate, and their kiss went on for a long time until she gasped for breath and pulled back to look at him. "Why, Nate? Why am I here? If you leave I won't stay, whatever it is. I'll never leave you again!"

Nate held her at arms length with his good arm. "The music is finished, Lyrae, and I sold the project to the company. It was a long shot, but they bought it, and there's only one person who can do the dancing I need. I wrote it for you, Lyrae."

Lyrae looked at him incredulously. "You got all my transmissions, didn't you? My knee? All the injuries I've had? Nate, that's cruel."

Jet-Dancer

Aboriginal Science Fiction — Sept.-Oct. 1990

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Our regular renewal rate is the same as our regular subscription rate — if we have to renew you. If you renew yourself, however, you can save at least \$2 or more. We figure you are smarter than the subscribers to other magazines and will recognize a good deal when you see it. There is a catch, of course — you have to self-renew before we send you a renewal notice. The sample label in the space below shows where to look for the expiration number of your subscription (we've circled it here) as it should appear on your mailing label. If you look at your label, the number of your last issue is the number the *farthest to left* on the top line.

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This is issue No. 23. The deadline for those whose subscriptions end with issue number 26 (our March-April 1990 issue) is Aug. 1, 1990 (determined by the U.S. Postal Service postmark on the letter). The deadline for subscriptions ending with issue No. 27 is Oct. 1, 1990, and so on. Of course, the simplest way of taking advantage of this unique offer is to fill out your renewal form below right now and to send it to us with your payment. Payment must accompany renewal orders to get the discounted rate.

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"No, no. You can't dance at one gee for any extended period, but I knew that before you went to Paris. In a weaker gravity, yes. It's only two-tenths gee here, Lyrae. Look, I want to show you something."

He took her hand, and led her towards the great dome. "People are moving in every day, and outside of work there's little to do. Corporate executives are here, Lyrae, and so are their spouses, and they are going nuts with boredom. These are educated and cultured people, with a taste for the good life, and suddenly they're on Mars, staring at red rock and dust storms obscuring the sky most of the time. So what do you do about this? Why, you bring culture to Mars, Lyrae. You bring it right here to Anaconda-Toshiro headquarters. Among other things, a ballet and modern dance company. Music and choreography I can do, but where do I find dancers and a ballet mistress?"

They reached the dome, the top near their heads, and Nate opened a door for her. It was a small door, next to two larger ones now tightly closed. When she stepped inside it seemed quite dark, but then she gasped at the sight of the thousands of seats tiered in rows and rows below her, a huge thrust of stage and wings set into a wedge-shaped structure far below, dimly lit. Five people were standing on the stage, and one of them waved. Nate returned it, then whispered into Lyrae's ear. "They had the theater, but nothing to put into it. Everything you've ever wanted can happen right here. Now let me introduce you to the corporate board."

One year. It had all happened in one year. Lyrae thought this even as she laced her way up and down the stage at the speed of light, Earth-trained muscles giving her the clear, exuberant attack and lightning feet of a *danseuse noble*, Nate's music filling her. In the lower

gravity of Mars her knee held, though it would always be sore and require whirlpool treatments each day for many years to come. That first night especially she felt strong, ever so strong, with the flirtatious exuberance of a hummingbird, embroidering her landings with minuscule shudders of fingers and hands.

That night, in news broadcasts on two planets and four colony wheels, critics would refer to her as "a bewitching, dainty ballerina, yet earthy, and the formidable technician you would expect of someone who has studied under Marinto. Her gorgeous, muscular legs lend a sexiness not found in zero-gee dancers, yet she does not ricochet from the walls like an errant shuttlecraft. Free of staccato stiffness, it is as if she is propelled by tiny rockets hidden in box pointe shoes to obscure the glare of her secret power." And then a direct quote from Lucille herself, after she and Lyrae had cried for joy in each other's arms backstage. "The species *primus ballerinae*," she said, "has taken its first steps into the universe."

And now it was after the applause, flowers, warm hugs from Lucille, and a long kiss from Nate, and just for one instant she was alone backstage with her joy and excitement. A distinguished-looking couple came up to her, and with them a tiny girl, perhaps five years old, dressed in lace, blonde hair tied up in a bun, looking very adult and serious.

"Her name is Monika," said the mother proudly.

Lyrae leaned over and took the tiny hand in hers. "Hello, Monika. Did you like the show?"

"Oh yes," said the little girl shyly. "I want to be a dancer like you someday." She swallowed hard, then looked up at Lyrae with full moon eyes.

"Will you teach me?" she asked.

And that was the real beginning of Lyrae Jellico's life. □

A Long Time Ago

Before taking charge at *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, our editor, Charles C. Ryan, was the editor of *Galileo*, a science fiction magazine published in the mid-1970s. During his tenure there, he helped discover a number of new writers who have since gone on to win Nebula and/or Hugo awards, such as Connie Willis, John Kessel, Lewis Shiner, and more.

We think he did a fine job at *Galileo*, and, in fact, it was on the strength of that performance that we picked him to help turn *Aboriginal Science Fiction* into the first successful SF magazine in a decade.

Now, on his behalf, we'd like to give you an opportunity to see some of the best stories he collected a decade ago.

For a limited time, while copies last, you can purchase a first-edition hardcover copy of *Starry Messenger: The Best of Galileo* for \$10, plus \$1 postage and handling. If you would like your copy autographed by the editor, please indicate how you would like the note to read.

Starry Messenger: The Best of Galileo (St. Martin's Press, 1979) features 12 stories by the following authors:

Harlan Ellison

M. Lucie Chin

Brian Aldiss

Joe L. Hensley

Alan Dean Foster

and Gene DeWeese

Connie Willis

John A. Taylor

John Kessel

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A Day In The Life



1 An eccentric hairy white-coated male.

2. A rather eccentric bespectacled man who wears a white coat and works in a laboratory that contains a lot of glassware.

3. A fairly mad-looking bloke, hair untidy, in a white coat, surrounded by explosions, atoms splitting, lightning all over the place.

4. A necessary evil.

What is being described above? I'm certain that you know. There is only one type of individual that fits that description. It is a scientist. This comes from an article by Janice Emens McAdams, entitled "The Persistent Stereotype: Children's Images of Scientists."¹

I read this article only one day after seeing a *Newsweek* in which the cover story was: "Not Just for Nerds — How to Teach Science to Our Kids."²

What's going on here? It's certainly been trendy for the past several years to lament how poorly our children do in science and math compared to the rest of the world. The *Newsweek* article is full of the depressing facts. In chemistry, physics, and biology our students rank behind all the Western European nations as well as Japan, Singapore, Hungary, and Poland. Only 45% of American adults know that the Earth orbits the Sun. Only 37% know that dinosaurs lived before the earliest human beings.

I am not about to offer up a solution to this problem. I simply don't have one. But I think I can see a small part of the problem, a part that I come into daily contact with. People who are not in science have a warped, childlike attitude about what scientists do and look like.

Look back up at those four observations at the beginning of this column. Those childhood opinions get carried on into later life. Often when I tell people what I do, people who are not involved in science, their eyes glaze, and they often proudly tell me that they don't understand any of this science stuff. They could never possibly do science stuff. I then ask them just what it is that they think I do all day. Some believe that I scribble all day long on a chalkboard, others think I and my colleagues gather in large rooms, scream equations back

and forth at one another, and occasionally scream "Eureka!", while others think that I twiddle a few knobs and dials but mostly sit in a dark room and think deep thoughts.

Lies.

All lies.

I'm going to tell you what one working scientist really does. I'm going to take you through a day that I had last week. You'll see that there's nothing mysterious or sinister about it, nothing beyond your understanding. I have a job, maybe not exactly like yours, but with a lot more similarities than I think you might believe.

7:02

Arrive in the parking lot of the Hughes Research Labs, located in Malibu, California. There is a long to-do list stuck in my head — the top three items seem to be: the oil needs changing in my car; if I don't do the laundry tonight, I'll have no underwear in the morning; and I owe an abstract to the Molecular Beam Epitaxial Workshop. Slam the car door and notice that the left rear tire looks a little low. I've probably picked up a nail. I pray to the god of radial tires to spare me.

7:05

Grunt a good morning at the back gate guard. He grunts back and waves a half-eaten doughnut at me.

7:11

Suit up. The lab's gowning room is deserted. No one comes in until 8:00. I get into my bunny suit: coveralls, boots, hood, gloves, and a full-face respirator — this is mostly to make sure I don't contaminate the lab with all the dirt and peeling skin that pours from the human body. The respirator is not standard — a vacuum chamber was opened the night before and my lab is now full of arsenic dust. I don't like breathing arsenic dust — it has a tendency to kill you. I'm just funny that way. I look like the Pillsbury Dough Boy in scuba gear. Pneumatic doors swish. The lab is a labyrinth of piping, electronics racks, vacuum vessels, tool boxes, pressure hoods, and cabinets. I pick up my wrench. I have no actual need for this wrench. It is my

security wrench. It is also fun to swing it threateningly at people when they tell me that something can't be done. I check my machine. It looks happy. Pressure is good, water is flowing nicely, temperatures in all effusion cells are steady. I open the valves to the liquid nitrogen to cool it down. I peck at a computer keyboard, inserting growth sequences that I want done today. My respirator makes my face sweat. I leave a note for my technician to begin cycling the warm-up programs for the machine, and that I will return by 9:00 to start growing samples.³

7:29

De-suit. I rub the dent in my forehead created by the too-snug respirator.

7:35

The office. The phone message light is flashing. I access the message computer. I have three messages. I hang up the phone. I have a rule — never listen to messages until there are at least ten. This technique works well. People rarely leave me messages. I suddenly wonder about my low tire and simultaneously realize that I'll have nothing to eat for breakfast unless I go to the store that night. I dwell on this for all of two seconds. I'll skip breakfast tomorrow. I prepare for the 8:00 meeting — this consists of scribbling with colored pens across transparencies.

8:17

Meeting finally begins. Department manager was late. He had an earlier meeting with plant facilities about the insufficient plumbing in our new building and why the toilets have backed up twice in the last month, resulting in a flood of our lowest-level lab. There was no conclusion to that meeting — it will require further investigation. Meeting begins. This is a strategy meeting. We discuss possible sources of funding from the alphabet soup agencies. Money from the Feds is getting tight. The Evil Empire is no longer quite so Evil. This problem requires further investigation. Only one thing is clear. We do not have enough view graphs. Note: view graphs are transparent sheets of plastic full of

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scribbles and pictures. This is the single largest product of any research lab. A general rule of thumb is that a project cannot be deemed complete until the height of a stack of view graphs produced from the project is taller than the primary investigator of said project (researchers under five feet tall are in great demand). Meeting ends at 9:56.

9:57

Emergency. I am stopped in the hallway by a frantic co-worker who explains that the Los Angeles Air Quality Management District is reviewing our operating permits. I begin to sweat. He says I must compile a list of every hazardous material that my machine comes in contact with — including specific volumes, masses, and quantities used on a daily and weekly basis. Define hazardous, I ask. He smiles and hands me a blank piece of paper. That is the first thing that I must do, he says. "When in doubt, consider it hazardous" is his credo.

9:58

Call down to lab to tell them I am trapped in an emergency and will be down even later than I already am. No one answers — so I record a message. I forgot that this is break time. I leave the building to get invoices on all chemicals and consumables that have been eaten by my machine in the past year.

10:06

Purchasing doesn't have invoices.

10:23

Records doesn't have invoices.

10:42

Shipping and Receiving doesn't have invoices.

10:58

Find invoices in the bottom of my technician's file cabinet, which is labeled with a bright red marker: Invoices. I make a mental note to investigate the contents of this file cabinet when I have the time — it might be full of all sorts of treasures.

11:02

Stop by Publications to pick up view graphs before returning to my desk. I have a program review this afternoon. I am expected to talk for twenty minutes — this will require twenty view graphs. Most are ready, but there are several mistakes. They cannot read my handwriting — they laughingly tell me that I missed my calling and should have been an M.D., and not a Ph.D. They have lost a high-magnification picture I took of one of my samples. There is not enough time to replace it. I take what they have ready and tell them I will be back after lunch for the corrected ones.

11:10

Shift through invoices. Did not realize how many chemicals I deal with that have the capability to kill me. But I don't

worry. In the ten years that I've been in this business, I've never poisoned myself once. My weakness is electricity. I once melted down a screwdriver with a 10,000-volt power supply and another time pulled off a high-voltage feed-through that was still powered up — drawing a foot-long arc of lightning before circuit breakers threw it off. I'm sure I'll be vaporized long before I'm poisoned. That thought cheers me up. I begin making lists of chemicals.

11:47

Call down to the lab to check on the progress of technicians. No one is there. They've left me a message telling me that they went to an early lunch to celebrate someone's retirement. Continue making my list — realizing that I'll be eligible for retirement in thirty years if I don't blow myself up first.

12:11

Cafeteria. Lunch is a turkey sandwich and some frozen yogurt — French vanilla with candy sprinkles. Sit with three other scientist-type colleagues. Topics of conversation include someone's new car that had a blown engine after only 8,000 miles, interest rates, the output resistance problems on a new type of transistor, a planned trip to England, and basketball. The basketball discussion becomes heated when it is suggested that a winning shot left a player's hand after the buzzer buzzed. I suggest that a solution to that problem might be that basketballs be equipped with internal light-weight capacitors that discharge automatically when the buzzer rings. If anyone is still touching the ball when that occurs, they'll be blown across the court. They tell me I'm crazy, but make allowances and forgive me, since they believe that I'm severely twisted (not because I'm a scientist, but because I'm also a writer).

12:29

Finish list of toxics. Go over new X-ray data. A tight beam of X-rays is shot into the material that I grow, and the way the beam bounces back tells me something about my sample. The only problem is that I can't quite figure out what these results are telling me. Things don't quite make sense — but I consider this a good sign. I like it when things don't make sense: it means that I might be onto something new.

1:11

Call down to the lab. No one has returned yet.

1:16

Pick up remaining view graphs.

1:22

Stop by someone's office. We discuss a possible paper we might present. An abstract would be due by next Wednesday and we haven't finished getting data yet. He won't have time. His in-laws are in town, and between Disneyland and

Universal City tours he will have no time. I volunteer — I have no in-laws. I'm getting the best end of the deal.

1:28

Put on a tie. I keep it in a desk drawer. It is my bad karma tie. I wear it during important meetings and program reviews. I pick up view graphs and head upstairs to conference room.

1:43

Meeting begins. Everyone is dressed differently — it runs from three-piece suits to jeans and T-shirts. You cannot tell who is who based on dress. A vice-president wears a sports shirt and slacks, while a first-year engineer is in a polyester three-piece with a blood-red power tie. I'm in a tie and dress shirt, but have on my black 501 Levis and my Nikes. There is not a white lab coat in sight. But I will admit that more than half the people wear glasses, and of the ten people there, only one is a woman — my boss (there does appear to be some basis for this male/glasses stereotype). The view graph onslaught begins. This is a scheduled two-hour meeting, which means that there should be over 100 view graphs. I get comfortable, pull out a piece of paper, and pretend to be taking notes. I'm not. I'm planning the experimental parameters for the next series of samples I want to grow. I want to see how beryllium diffuses through aluminum-indium-arsenide.

2:59

I show my twenty view graphs. Few questions are asked. The people who know what I'm up to are already current with the results I'm presenting, and those who are high above me in the corporate structure have got more on their minds than things like arsenic over-pressures and critical thicknesses. But none of that matters. It is obvious to all that I've done a good job — I must have — I've got enough results to fill twenty view graphs.

3:49

Before going down to the lab, first stop by the library. I scan the new *Applied Physics Letters*. There's a good paper on the photoluminescence spectrum of gallium-indium-arsenide as a function of growth temperature. Very interesting. I make a copy and almost escape the library. A section head grabs me. He needs samples grown in support of one of his projects. "Can we talk?" he asks.

4:17

We talk. He explains the sort of samples he needs in order to build gee-whiz electronic devices that will blow the Japanese out of the water. I then explain that it may be physically impossible to grow what he wants — the physics simply may not permit it. He asks me not to say no to his request but to please think about it. Isn't there a way

around the physics? I smile. There might be, but I can't make any promises. I begin to think of ways not to break the laws of physics but to bend them a bit. I love bending rules.

4:51

Enter the lab. Once more squirm into bunny suit. The lab is deserted. There is a note on the machine. All the samples that I'd requested in the morning have been grown, so everyone went home a bit early. Note goes on to say that things went very smoothly in the lab today and that perhaps there is a correlation between that event and the fact that I wasn't there. Very funny. I gather up the samples and begin inspecting them under the microscope, taking pictures of anything that looks strange.

5:37

Have almost thirty pictures of strange things — I'm quite happy. Leave

the lab and de-suit. Get halfway up to my office when I remember that I forgot to turn off the machine's liquid nitrogen feed-throughs. I swear something, return to the lab, suit up, turn off the nitrogen, de-suit, and return to my office.

6:03

Gather up several papers I want to read tonight. Check my phone. Only five messages, so I listen to none of them. Turn off the lights.

6:09

Grunt good night to the guard. He grunts good night to me and waves a half-eaten doughnut. This is a different guard from the one in the morning, but I can't be so sure about the doughnut.

6:12

My car is listing. I have a flat tire.

6:29

Tire changed.

This was my day. It was not a typical day — there are no typical days. But as you can see, it was a mix of science, too many meetings, silly emergencies, a few laughs, and a few too many hours worked. That's it. Learn a little math, study a little physics and you too can enter into the eccentric, white-coated, bespectacled, atom-smashing world of the scientist. But be warned — those who have an aversion to View Graphs and meetings need not apply.

¹ Janice Emens McAams, *Phys Educ.*, 25 (1990), p. 102.

² *Newsweek*, April 9, 1990, p. 52.

³ Molecular beam epitaxy. This is a method of growing crystalline materials in atom-by-atom layers by evaporating streams of ultrapure atoms like arsenic and gallium onto a heated piece of crystal. □

ABORIGINES

By Laurel Lucas

Survivors

Kristine K. Rusch is back with "Story Child." It's about survivors of a mysterious disaster who struggle with guilt and illness.

Rusch's rapid and dazzling rise is



Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Her 1989 story "Fast Cars" was a Nebula finalist, and another story, "Phantoms," is a finalist for the Stoker Award from the Horror Writers of America. Her fans will recall "Looking for Miriam" (Jan.-Feb. 1989), "Solo for



Lori Deitrick

lowing week and were going to try to make it to DeepSouthCon in Chattanooga the week after that. David will be attending the University of Tennessee to pursue art studies.



John Gribbin

Concert Grand" (Jan.-Feb. 1988), and "Sing" (Feb.-March 1987).

"Story Child" is illustrated by Lori Deitrick. When I spoke with her, she and her husband, Aboriginal artist David R. Deitrick, were planning to move to Knoxville, Tennessee, the fol-

Lori says she's begun painting mostly with acrylics, leaving watercolors behind for the time being. She says their new home has a big basement that they will quickly turn into studio space.

John Gribbin and Marcus Chown have teamed up to write "Survival of the

enough to make other writers gnash their teeth in envy. She has been nominated again for the John W. Campbell Award for best new writer. She's sold four novels in the past year, the latest being *Aftershock*, written with Kevin J. Anderson, and *Heart Readers*.

Aborigines

Aboriginal Science Fiction — Sept.-Oct. 1990

Fittest," about an astronaut on an asteroid mining mission who must use his wits to survive a calamity.



Marcus Chown

Gribbin and Chown both hail from the United Kingdom. Gribbin has a Ph.D. in astrophysics from the University of Cambridge and writes science books when he's not writing science fiction.

His latest novels are *Double Planet* (Avon), written with Marcus Chown, and *Father to the Man* (Tor). He's also very proud of his short story "The Best Is Yet to Be," which appeared in *Analogs* February, 1990, issue. In a slightly different vein, he has written *The Cartoon History of Time* with Karen Charlesworth.

Marcus Chown is also trained in astrophysics and is a journalist with *New Scientist*. His first novel was *Double Planet*; his second, also written with John Gribbin, is titled *Reunion*.

Chown says he likes walking in the countryside, feeding the ducks in London, and eating chocolate doughnuts. He says he recently stayed in Condom, France. (You've got to be kidding.)

"Survival of the Fittest" is illustrated by David Brian. The artist says space



David Brian

scenes are his type of illustration. "I'm not much for unicorns," he says. Brian's work has been on the covers of four *Aboriginal* issues in the past year as well.

Brian has been busy doing ink drawings for the premiere issue of *Iniquities*, a new horror magazine. He's also been sending slides to paperback publishers.

An adventurous teenager and an alien with a cattle fetish make a lively pair in "U F O" by Michael Swanwick.

Swanwick has three novels under his belt, including *Vacuum Flowers* (Arbor House, Ace). His first short story, "The Feast of Saint Janis," was a Nebula Award nominee, and his story "A Midwinter's Tale" won the Davis Reader's Award from *Isaac Asimov's*.

Swanwick is married to *Marianne Porter*, a "scientific bureaucrat," and they have a son. With summer here it's a good bet that Swanwick is either writing or fishing.

"U F O" is illustrated by *Robert J. Pasternak*. When I spoke with him, he had just finished his second cover for *On*



Michael Swanwick

Spec, a new Canadian magazine of speculative writing.

Pasternak says his career is undergoing major changes in direction. He is putting more energy into the business aspect, and he's concentrating on pictures for art gallery display. He says he's doing more landscapes in a style he's dubbed "organic geometrics," mixing real elements with abstract fantasy.

He's also having fun with rubber stamps he's created depicting such things as a hand picking up a little boy, a flying eyeball spaceship, and a juggling griffin.

In "Jet Dancer" by *James C. Glass*, a zero-gravity dancer wants to test her skills on Earth.

Glass is Dean of Mathematical Sciences and Technology at Eastern Washington University. He edited a fanzine as a teenager, then about six years ago he began writing again and says "the

disease is getting serious."

He's written two novels, and two of his short stories are appearing in *Owl-*



James C. Glass

flight. His story "Georgi" took first place in the Writers of the Future Contest, first quarter 1990.

Glass is married to recreational therapist Gail Glass. He is active in mountaineering and recently tackled Mount Hood in Oregon.

Among his favorite artists, Glass lists Aboriginal artists *Pat Morrissey* and *Cortney Skinner*. So it's fitting that Skinner is the illustrator for "Jet Dancer."

When I spoke with Cortney, he was getting ready for the 18th-Century Market Days with the Brigade of the American Revolution on Staten Island in New York. His character is a poor itinerant artist, and he has painted a dummy board, a life-sized painting on wood of the type popular as lawn and garden ornaments in the 18th century. It's of a servant in a chair peeling apples. Today you're more likely to see simpler woolly lambs.

Skinner is excited about being



Cortney Skinner

nominated for a Chesley Award by the Association of Science Fiction and Fantasy Artists. It's for the art he did for



Erick Melton

"Eating Memories," a story by Patricia Anthony in our May-June 1989 issue. The model for that painting was Skinner's friend and fellow Aboriginal artist Larry Blamire.

Erick Ray Melton's story "Random Access" brings new meaning to the term "interactive computing." It is Melton's first published short story. He has also written several articles for the science fiction game magazine *Challenge*. He says he is working on more stories, articles, and his first novel.

Melton was trained as an actor and works for a film distribution company and for a professional children's theater company in Los Angeles. The company recently did a pilot for a cable television show that received several awards for children's programming.

"Random Access" is illustrated by Lucy Synk. Synk tells me that she's been busy preparing to be artist guest of honor at a couple of conventions and trying out new techniques. Instead of



Lucy Synk

painting in oils, she has started using acrylics, which dry faster, for the background, then painting oils on the foreground. She's also experimenting with textures, like blotting still-damp paint with paper towels.

She's also returned to a bit of her past, working part-time at Hallmark where she worked "years ago."

In "Russian Roulette" by Phillip C. Jennings, some svelte Yuppies come up with a way to take turns pigging out with all the pleasure but none of the gain.

Jennings has been writing fiction in all forms: short stories, novels, novelettes, and novellas. His "Betrothal" is the lead and cover story in an upcoming issue of *Isaac Asimov's*.

Jennings is the author of "Doctor Quick" (Sept.-Oct. 1988), "Rough Character" (Nov.-Dec. 1989), and "Queen of the Atzu" (May-June 1990). Although central characters in "Russian Roulette" and "Queen of the Atzu" are obese



Phillip C. Jennings

females, Jennings says he's resolved to "give up fat-lady stories. It's a bad thing to get known for."

"Russian Roulette" is illustrated by Lori Deitrick. She says she had a hard time finding a very obese person as a model and ended up using a photograph of a woman from a greeting card.

The poem "Same Song, Different Star" is by Ann K. Schwader, who also wrote "Muttmind" (Jan.-Feb. 1988) and "Killing Gramps" (Sept.-Oct. 1988).

Schwader says she's a full-time writer with a "tolerant spouse." She got her start writing *Star Trek* fan fiction in high school. Her book *Werewomen and Other Poems* is just out from Nocturnal Publications, and she's finishing up a science fiction novel titled *Parijata*.

Schwader says she took part in her first writers' panel this past fall at Mile-HiCon in Denver. Look for her story "Nectar" in a forthcoming issue of *Aboriginal*.

We must apologize to Holly Lisle, who wrote the poem "To An Android

Lover" in our last issue. We mistakenly referred to her as Holly Lisle Deaton. That version of her name, she tells us, is outdated.

Nebula Awards

The Nebula Award ceremonies were held in May by the Science Fiction Writers of America, and the following winners were announced:

Best Novel

The Heater's War, by Elizabeth Ann Scarborough

Best Novella

The Mountains of Mourning, by Lois McMaster Bujold

Best Novelette

"At the Rialto," by Connie Willis

Best Short Story

"Ripples in the Dirac Sea," by Geoffrey A. Landis

Writers of the Future Awards

James Gardner of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada won the grand prize of \$4,000 in the Writers of the Future contest for story "The Children of Creeche." He also won \$1,000 for his first-place finish in the first quarter.

Also winning first-place awards of \$1,000 were John W. Randall, whose story "Water" won in the second quarter (Randall's first published story appeared in *Aboriginal SF's* July-Aug. 1989 issue); Bruce Holland Rogers of Boulder, Colorado for the story "A Branch in the Wind," which won in the third quarter; and James G. Bishop, Capt., USAF, of Colorado Springs, Colorado, won first place in the fourth quarter for his story "The Vintager."

Derek Hegseth of Provo, Utah, won the grand prize for the first Illustrators of the Future contest, netting \$4,000 and \$500 for first place in the monthly contest. A total of 12 artists each won \$500 for placing first in their respective months. □

What is an SASE?

Many of our readers who would like to be writers do not know what a SASE is, or when it *must* be used.

We know, because our office is filling up with unsolicited manuscripts which were submitted without a SASE. A SASE is a self-addressed, stamped envelope included with a manuscript so that it can be returned if it is not accepted. A smaller SASE is used if you don't want the manuscript or art returned and simply wish a response. SASEs are also helpful if you desire an answer to a question you might have about the magazine. □

Story Child

By Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Art by Lori Deitrick

I remember the story child as well as I remember the Abandonment. Now, almost a generation later, I can't quite say what she looked like. But I know what she taught me, and how hard it was to learn.

The day she arrived, the noise was fierce. People were moaning, crying out in their delirium. And the cafeteria was too cold. The chill from the floor-to-ceiling windows that lined the eastern wall seemed to cover me, even when I worked with patients in the far back corner of the room. I thought that the heat from their skin would warm me; they were all burning with fever, faces flushed or too pale, their hands shaking with weakness. We had had so many unexplained fevers, unknown diseases, and lingering illnesses in the past two years that I often wondered which would give up first, the germs or the people. I knew that I would continue until I dropped.

"Michael," Arlene asked as I applied the patch thermometer beneath her tongue, "I'm going to die, aren't I?"

I looked at her. She had been pretty once, two or three years ago, before all this started. Now her skin was drawn and ashen, her cheekbones too prominent, and her eyes almost too big for her head. I had a soft spot for Arlene; she was one of the few people who had been kind to me before the Abandonment, when I had been the only young doctor in the East End clinic, rather than the only doctor in town.

I slid my hands down her throat, checking her lymph nodes. No swelling. No mucus on her tonsils, no evidence of infection anywhere. I knew that her blood tests would be normal.

"I don't know, Arlene," I said. "I'm going to do my damnedest to make sure you don't."

But my damnedest didn't count for much anymore. The high-school cafeteria was filled with sick people, and more waited outside in the hall. Most of these people had lost all of their families and friends either to the disappearance of the diseases that rippled through the community like waves against the Lake Superior shoreline. We would get one sickness cured — or stopped — or it would simply end on its own — but it would go away. A week later another would start. I worked with a small team: four R.N.s who had worked at the hospital, one L.P.N., and Lucy, who had just graduated from medical school a month before this all began. Lucy was asleep upstairs in the teacher's lounge. She would take over for me when I couldn't stand any longer.

"Michael," Arlene grabbed my arm. Her fingers felt hard and hot against my wrist. "I think I'm delirious."

Her eyes had focused on something over my shoulder. I turned. A small skimmer floated above the tables. A young girl, who was no more than ten, sat cross-legged on the saucer-like surface. No one spoke, but everyone looked at her. Perhaps, like Arlene, they all thought they saw a fever dream. Skimmers were energy-wasting children's

toys. Before he died of the previous fever, Jim, the mechanic, had pulled the power sources from every skimmer we could find for use in more practical machinery.

But no one was looking at the skimmer. We were all looking at the child.

We had heard of children still living toward the south, strange tales of psi powers, mental disease, and violence, but I had never believed them. Even if children had made it through the Abandonment, they didn't have the constitutions to survive the diseases.

I took a step forward. "Hello," I said.

A gasp rose through the room, and I could guess the thought on every mind, the thought unspoken: *She is real, then. Maybe I am not as sick as I thought.* Or maybe, *The doctor is sick, too.* I shook that idea away. I had no time to be sick. If I died, the community would die. It was that simple.

The skimmer floated down to me, making the wind-like humming sound I thought I had forgotten. My daughter had a skimmer. We took it out in Hammond Park the day before she disappeared — the day before the world disappeared — and she giggled as she floated over the trees. That hum was a counterpoint to her laughter. The memory made me ache.

The girl watched me as the skimmer landed on the floor between us. She unfolded herself from the plastic surface with the awkward grace of an almost-woman. I had forgotten that too. And I had forgotten the way a child's face seemed only half-formed: hers foretold a serious, patrician future, with high cheekbones and wide eyes. Model pretty, in the world that had gone.

"You're tired," she said. Her voice was soft, wispy, with soprano edges on what would become contralto.

I let the rich voice soothe me. The muscles in my back ached, and my temples throbbed. My feet were almost numb in their shoes and my hands were shaking with exhaustion. I had been tired for two years.

"Who are you?" I asked, but the girl had already wandered away from me, to Mr. McRenly, who shuddered under a blanket on one of our few cots. The child took his hand, covered it with her own, and said, "Let me tell you a story."

I started to go to her, to tell her not to disturb the sick people, when Sarah, one of the nurses, passed me. "I'll take care of her. Arlene needs you."

I turned. Arlene looked as if she were about to pass out. I eased her back onto the table — wishing, still wishing that we had beds. But most of those were in the hospital, and we had left that first, feeling that the germs were growing there like invisible warriors. We emptied the clinics next, then the hotels, and now we were down to our last big place, the high school.



Lori Detrick....89



LOU DIETRICK '89

I pulled the patch from Arlene's mouth, barely having to glance at the old-fashioned digital numbers. 104.5 Fahrenheit. All we had were the old thermometers, and the high non-metric number seemed even more frightening than a Celsius reading. 104.5. It flashed through my dreams.

Her fever hadn't been that high a few minutes ago — I could have sworn it. Something had caused the rise. Something had changed.

I glanced over at the child.

She was still holding Mr. McRenly's hand. Sarah stood beside the table, a troubled frown on her face.

I gave Arlene two ancient aspirin, forced her to swallow them, and wrapped a blanket tightly around her. There wasn't much else I could do. Not until we pinpointed a cause.

Sarah looked up at me. I thought I saw tears glinting in her eyes. With a slight movement of her head, she indicated that I should come over there.

I did. And as I did, people reached out to me, touching my sleeve or my arm, in a silent plea for help. I ignored them. The little girl stood up as I approached, and went to the next table. I stopped in front of Mr. McRenly. Sarah had already placed a patch thermometer beneath his tongue, but I could tell her without seeing it that his temperature would be normal. Sweat had broken out all over his body, and his color had returned. I touched his forehead. It was damp, but cool.

"What did she do?" I asked.

"She told him a story," Sarah said.

The room seemed to have grown colder. I walked over to the next table. The girl held the hand of Marita Fisher.

"And on that morning," the girl was saying, "she woke up to find everyone gone."

The Abandonment. The child was telling about the Abandonment. Marita stirred, as if to stop the story, but the girl continued.

"She walked through the streets and it looked as if everyone had just vanished. Cars had gone off the road. Coffee cups stood half-full in the restaurants, the grills on, food burning. She must have put out half a dozen small fires"

A dizziness swept through me that I couldn't control. I lurched forward, grabbed at a table and missed, nearly falling on the floor. Sarah grabbed me; she must have hurried over when she saw me stumble.

"Enough," she said. "You're going upstairs. Lucy can take over for you."

I wanted to protest, but the dizziness wasn't going away. Lucy needed her rest too, and she'd only had a few hours. I didn't know what I would do if she got sick.

Sarah placed her arm around the middle of my back. "You have to walk alone," she said. "You don't want people to think something is wrong with you."

She was right. All they had was an ever-so-faint hope that I could do something. I shook Sarah away, and took one measured step, then another. I could make it upstairs. But the child —

"I'll take care of the child," Sarah said.

I frowned. I hadn't realized that I had spoken aloud. The exhaustion seeped deeper into my bones, and I wished that the child had never talked to me. The walk to the stairs seemed interminable, and the climb tired me. I stopped on the first landing and looked.

The line wound

down the hall to the gym. Most people sat as they waited, leaning on the cold glass and the brick walls. It seemed as if the entire town were here, or what was left of it. Maybe this was the last fever, and it would take all of us, and it would take all of us to the place where the others had disappeared on that empty morning two years ago.

I sighed and climbed the rest of the way up. They needed Lucy if they didn't have me. Someone making an effort. Someone trying.

The door to the teacher's lounge was open. Lucy was asleep on the couch, her long dark hair pulled free of its combs and sprawled along the armrest. One bare foot peeked out from under the blanket. Even in sleep, there were shadows under her eyes.

I sat down beside her and smoothed the soft hair from her face. Her skin temperature felt normal to the touch. As my hand moved, the tension in her body grew. I knew that, even though her eyes were still closed, she was awake.

"How bad?" she asked.

"Line all the way to the gym."

She sighed and sat up. Two years ago, when I met her, she had looked like a young girl. Her eyes had had that innocent look of someone who thought life continued forever. Now crow's feet lined the corners, and the innocent look had been replaced by a resigned fear. I wanted to take her in my arms and soothe her, but I didn't have the time. Or the energy.

"You're exhausted," she said. She stood up and eased me down, pulling off my shoes and wrapping the blanket around me. Her hand lingered a moment too long on my forehead, and I wondered what she felt. Too much heat? Or the cold that had joined my tiredness?

"Lucy, the child!" I sat up, but Lucy was gone. The light looked different. I must have slept. Sitting so fast increased my dizziness, and I didn't lie back so much as fall back. This time, I felt sleep take me, and as I slipped under, I realized that I was sick, too. The fever had finally found me.

It took me into dreams of viruses chasing healthy blood cells through my system, of med-school lectures about the inevitability of disease, of Lucy crying with frustration, of children with psi powers and pregnant women. I hadn't seen a pregnant woman since the Abandonment. No growing life, only fading life. Faces paraded across my consciousness, people who had died, who were dying. And I was helpless, paralyzed, trapped in my own dying body, unable to care for them, with no one to care for me.

A hand held mine. A cool hand, a too-small hand. Its grip was dry and gentle.

"Let me tell you a story."

I recognized the voice. The rich voice with soprano edges. The contralto with childlike tones. I couldn't move to say yes or no, and I didn't want to pull away.

"It's the story of a man born in the southern part of Wisconsin, to a farm family. He worked hard, this little boy, baling hay, milking cows, gardening, canning, but always finding time to read. Sometimes he thought —"

that my family didn't care about me. They only cared about my hands, and my back, my ability to lift and carry, to help for the price of room and board. I missed weeks of school, and struggled with my studies, often hurrying to the bus while I still smelled of cows and dung. No one cared for me, no one could get near me —

"until college, when he finally escaped. An understanding counselor and a scholarship bought him freedom, and he never turned around, working summers in Madison instead of returning home. It seemed as if the family didn't miss him. No one even bothered to tell him —"

that my father was ill. No one had bothered to help him either. I came home on a lark to find him dying of something that could have been stopped. Strange time to realize you love someone. Strange time to find your calling. After the funeral, I went back and enrolled in pre-med, and worked —

"and worked and worked. He found time to court his wife, a slender, beautiful woman — a musician — with a wide capacity for understanding. He found time for his daughter, even with med school and internships and residencies. He was busy all the time, hardly sleeping, always working, always giving, but finally getting something back —"

until that June morning when I woke up to an empty bed. I called for Susan and Sharon. I ran through the house, searching. Breakfast was on the table, the eggs half-eaten. The cars were in the garage. No one, absolutely no one was on the street. In the next few days, I realize —

"that they weren't the only ones who had left him. Almost everyone had left. There were scientific explanations about a new weapon, and mystical ones about people transferring into another dimension, but no one really knew what had happened. Some of the survivors were calling it the Rapture, saying that God had finally come and taken the faithful away. But Lucy, one of the few people he still knew, called it the Abandonment. And he felt abandoned, as unloved now as he ever had been. Perhaps more because —"

they didn't take me with them. They didn't love me enough to take me along. I wondered what I had done or hadn't done, working harder and harder, still losing people faster than I could help them.

"What he never realized was that people lived their own lives. It wasn't what he had done or hadn't done, but what had been given him. He was strong, a survivor, able to cope with almost anything. He is here because he is needed. And he meets that need."

Something warm and wet slid into my eye, burning behind the lid. I opened my eyes, expecting to see the child, but I was alone. And soaked. The blanket was wet, I was wet, sweat poured down my face. The child had healed me. Her touch had healed me as it had healed Mr. McRenly.

I staggered up, wiped my face and walked to the door. Downstairs, everything was quiet — as quiet as it had been when my family disappeared. Lucy. I had to find Lucy. I raced down the stairs, seeing no one in the hall, no line in the cafeteria. The tile was cold against my bare feet. The tables in the cafeteria were clear, no blankets, no bodies. No skimmer rested on the floor. This time, they had left and cleaned up after themselves.

"Lucy!" I called. If she had left, and I was completely alone, I didn't know what I would do. I could only survive so much. "Lucy!"

She came out of the kitchen, a towel in one hand. In the back of the room, I finally saw Sarah, wiping the table down.

"You look better," Lucy said.

I sat down, feeling ridiculous for my panic. I hadn't had a panic attack like that for nearly a year. "Where is everyone?"

"Home."

I glanced around the cafeteria. One of the other nurses was mopping the floor. "Where is she?"

Lucy shook her head. "She took her skimmer and left before I even noticed she was gone. I have some people out looking for her"

I nodded. The exhaustion was back, but this time it was exhaustion born of relief. This fever had passed. We could have a few days of rest. A few days of hope. A few days to be free.

A few days turned into a few weeks. No one got ill. Everyone went about his or her business. We actually had time to disinfect the hospital. Lucy and I cleaned and cleaned. People helped us make new mattresses for the beds. We found extra blankets. I organized a large painting party, and we painted the surgical rooms, the examination rooms, and the first-floor rooms. We finally had a real facility with passable equipment.

And no one got sick. I went into my office every day and read, trying to discover what the child had done to save us all. I read books on healing, on touch, on psychic powers, and found nothing. I found myself staring at my scuffed office walls so long that I finally decided to paint them, too. Reading was getting me nowhere. I had no answers.

I had just moved the furniture into the center of the room when someone knocked on my door.

It was Lucy. "We found her."

I didn't have to ask who the "her" was. I set down my paintbrush. "Where is she?"

"Downstairs," Lucy said. "She's very ill."

We hurried down the poorly-lit corridors. Our footsteps echoed in the silence. The hospital's emptiness still bothered me. This was one place that should have people, always busy, with voices calling names and instructions over the PA system. Life would begin here, end here, and be renewed here. And now there was nothing.

Except a sick little girl downstairs.

We took the stairs that led to the emergency area. They had her in the clinic room. Sarah was monitoring her vital signs when I came in the door.

The child lay on the cot, her eyes closed. I hadn't remembered what she looked like, only her voice. The voice was silent, and she was emaciated. Her skin was gray. An occasional shudder ran through her. I didn't have to see her chart to know that she was dying.

I washed my hands, checked her chart and the patch thermometer. The feeling had returned — that thick, all-pervasive helplessness. And the exhaustion.

"Where was she found?" I asked.

"Between here and Ashland. She had set her skimmer down on the side of the road. She could have been there for days, we don't know," Sarah said.

Lucy and I looked at each other. Her thoughts were the same as mine. Hopeless. It was all hopeless.

But in the next few hours, we did everything. We gave her aspirin, some precious antibiotics, checked for infection, ran blood tests and urine tests. No matter what we did, she seemed to get worse.

Finally, I walked away to take a rest. Perhaps, with distance, I would get some perspective. I worked even harder on her than I had worked with anyone else. I felt as if I owed her, as if we owed her, for the revival of our small community. Somehow I had to keep her alive.

Lucy handed me a cup of coffee and sat down beside me. The cup felt hot against my cold fingers. "I don't know what to do," I said.

Lucy nodded. "We have to do something. People here believe in her. If they find out that she's sick"

I looked at Lucy. She didn't know what she had said. *People believe in her.* All this time I had looked in the wrong books, studied the wrong reasons. I had been looking for a medical reason, a physical reason for the change, but the child had given us nothing physical. She had spoken to our psyches, our selves, the wounded children inside us who had been abandoned by their families, their friends, and their peers. Children, on a fundamental level, who believed that they weren't worth anything and had no reason for living. She saw us all, and by seeing us, let us know that we still mattered.

He was strong, a survivor, able to cope with almost anything.

He is here because he is needed.

She had given me a realization, a new way to look at what had happened to us two years before. The event was not an abandonment, nor was it a rapture in which the best were taken. It was a saving. A kind of Darwin-esque experiment of survival of the fittest.

I set my coffee down and wandered back to the girl.

"What are you doing?" Lucy asked.

"I'm trying something."

I pulled up a chair beside the child and took her hand. She hadn't moved. If anything, she looked thinner, even more ashen. Her skin was burning to the touch. "I want to tell you a story," I said. My heart was pounding. I had no psi powers. I didn't know her history. I took a deep breath. "A little girl came to our town on a skimmer. She touched people and told them stories and healed hurts that they had been carrying for years. Then she got sick, and they wanted to help her, but they didn't know how."

I stopped. Her breathing was still ragged, her skin still hot. I shook my head, remembering. It wasn't the history that had been important. It had been the perspective. But she had known where my hurts were. I could only guess at hers.

I stared at her for a long time. When she had come into the cafeteria, she had seemed self-possessed, a tiny Buddha on her skimmer. She had let none of us in and reached to all of us. I knew that feeling, of giving, giving, giving, and never receiving, going on internal energy and not replenishing the stock. She was healing others, just as I had been, and taking nothing for herself.

"I can't tell stories," I said. I clutched her hand against my chest, leaned forward and brushed her hair away from her overheated forehead. "But I can tell you this. I know how tired you are, and how you need to help, and how it feels as if you are all alone, trying to save the world. You save the world better than I do. You reach in and touch people's souls. You have a gift for healing. You don't have to carry it alone. We're here and we want to help."

The hand in mine stirred. She blinked and her eyes opened. There was no quick break, no sweat as there had been when she talked with me. The expression on her face

was cool and withdrawn.

"No one has ever helped me before." Only her mouth moved when she spoke. Her gaze remained flat, challenging.

I squeezed her hand. "No one has ever realized that you needed help before."

She nodded and closed her eyes. She seemed very still. I had killed her. Somehow, I had done the exact wrong thing. I shook as I took her pulse. It was there, but faint.

Lucy grabbed a patch thermometer and put it in the child's mouth. She didn't move, didn't blink. Her breathing seemed shallow. I stroked her cheek, wishing that she would open her eyes. But she didn't. Not even when Lucy removed the patch.

"102.6," Lucy said.

It took a minute for that to register. 102.6 Fahrenheit. The child's temperature had gone down.

Iwish I could say that ended it and we all lived happily ever after. But a week after she began to heal, the story child disappeared on her skimmer. Diseases came back to our town, but never again ravaged the entire community. Lucy and I eventually married, and on our wedding night found ourselves presiding over the first birth the Northern Great Lakes had seen in nearly four years.

Once, though, almost a decade later, I heard from a Southerner of a woman who told stories. She spoke to no one except those who needed her help. But the Southerner said the woman seemed to have an inner joy — and that the stories she told were always stories of hope. □

Our Next Issue

The Nov.-Dec. 1990 Aboriginal Science Fiction will feature:

"Given the Game" by Daniel Keys Moran — The Alien came and co-opted the human race into the ultimate game where the only rule was survival. Art by Charles Lang

"The Undiscovered Country" by Lynn Hightower — Siegel had fled to the African veldt and sought isolation so that his psychotic fits would harm no one but himself. But even that wasn't enough; he was ready to end it all ... until an old Masai offered another choice. Art by Carol Heyer

"Henry, Have You Gone to the Moon?" by Steve Forstner — The old geezer across the street said he was building a spaceship in his garage with mail-order parts. Yeah, and the moon is made of green cheese, he thought, borrowing the old man's tools often enough that he got talked into helping out. But what really didn't make sense was the cat ... Art by Carol Heyer

"God's Bullets" by Rory Harper — Humankind had finally done it, blown the Earth into a thousand pieces. The handful of survivors in orbit, modified to inhabit space, prospected the asteroid-sized chunks of Earth to survive. But sometimes those frozen pieces of the past held ghosts. Art by Charles Lang

"Life Support" by Lois Tilton — Science and technology keep pushing the limits of medical skill until deciding who should live and who should die becomes nearly impossible. Art by Wendy Snow

"Serving the Market" by Steven Benson — Modson was the ultimate salesman, but even he had a hard time trying to sell computers to the primitive swamp dwellers of Trell. Then the company found a way to really motivate him. Art by Steven Benson

Random Access

By Erick Melton

Art by Lucy Synk

Good afternoon, Mr. Grey. It has been some time since last we met. I hope everything is going well?"

Grey started slightly, then settled himself into the large, padded examination chair. As usual, he was taken unaware by the opening of dialogue. He did not bother to turn around. There was no one there to face, just the VDT and the voice synthesizer. He did briefly question the choice of words. If everything were going well, he wouldn't be here. Nor would he continue to come here, once every other week, as he had for the majority of his adult life.

One of these days I'm going to just come right out and say exactly how I feel, he thought. Instead, "Okay. Things are fine, just fine."

"We don't sound too sure of ourselves, but that's all right. That's what I'm here for." There was a soft whirring sound, barely audible above the continuous noise of the canned instrumental music. From long association with his own work he knew the source of the sound. Today's therapy session was about to begin.

"Is there something troubling you at work? Some conflict with an associate, or perhaps difficulty with an important project?"

"No," Grey shook his head. "Everything's fine. As a matter of fact, we just finished a major project for one of the S&Ls. We start alpha-testing the software the beginning of next week." And that meant no more need to go down to development, not anymore.

"That's good. I think the work you do is fascinating. You are a remarkably talented individual."

Grey shrugged. Compliments about his work, especially those heard in the midst of therapy, did little for him.

"It also has the added side-effect of making my work that much easier."

Grey reached up automatically and touched the input wires behind his head, following them to the ports at the base of his skull. Any programmer who was serious about what he did had implants now. He still had to fight the need to explain when they were commented on. Like compliments, such talk didn't do much for him.

The soft, whirring sound came to him once more. "How about your personal life? As I recall, the last time we met you were discussing the current state of a rather serious personal relationship. What is the status of that?"

Grey stretched his neck, adjusting it on the headrest. Say it quickly, and don't stammer like an idiot. "The person ... woman, I was involved with ... well, we aren't involved anymore."

"I see." There was a pause filled with whirring. "From what my notes indicate, this 'involvement' was quite a serious one, wasn't it?"

"Yes." Grey tried to swallow, failed, then cleared his throat. "Yes, it was ... but, ah, now it's over."

"If I recall correctly, you were planning to make the association more permanent."

Grey nodded.

Pause. Whirring. "I think it would be best if we focused today's session on this relationship."

"I really don't think that will be completely...."

"Mr. Grey, please. You really should trust my judgment in this. If I came to you with a problem in a subroutine of my billing program, you would expect me to at least listen to your advice first, wouldn't you?"

Grey let out a sigh, and nodded. "Yes, I guess I would."

"There. So why don't we go back over this relationship from the beginning." Another whirr. "I see here that you met her at work, well over a year ago."

"Yes. We were introduced to each other by...."

"There is no need for you to tell me, Mr. Grey. All I need for you to do is to go over that moment in your mind. Concentrate on everything you remember. Especially those minor details that a person might not notice offhand, any particular smells, sounds...."

Grey let his mind drift over the moment. It had been cold, but they had left their jackets in the office.

"... The texture of the building, the walkway you were standing on. How your clothes felt on your body...."

Rumpled, he thought. They had been up all night and were taking a break to get a late dinner, or early breakfast, however you wanted to look at it.

"... The color of her dress, the smell of perfume, how she had done her hair...."

In an instant he was there again. Her hair first caught his eye. Long, thick, and silky, with a life of its own. Seeing her for months around the building, wondering who she was, and then to run right into her....

Another soft whirr barely came to him....

Prissey!" John moved forward past him.

He turned. He stopped. He stared. The two of them were embracing. He watched them closely, and relaxed when he determined that it was the hug of good friends, nothing more.

"I thought you were living down south." Her voice was a bright, lively alto. His dream of meeting her came face to face with her sudden presence.

"I am ... well, I was, up until last week. They brought me up here to work on the project for the financing company." John reached out and pulled him into view. "Pris, do you know Alec? We're working together on the project."

He held his hand out. His disarray felt more like the plague now. He brushed his rumpled shirt with one hand as she took his hand, smiling brightly. Soft hands, gentle. He felt his pulse quicken even as he tried to calm down.

"Hi," he finally managed to get out. "We've never been introduced, but I've seen you around."



"Yes, you work in programming." The warmth seemed to radiate up through his arm, as the blood hit his face. Maybe she has noticed me. She is so attractive. He felt himself floating in her eyes.

A waiting silence caught his attention. "I'm sorry, what was that you said?" He mentally kicked himself, willing greater attention.

She smiled, then giggled. "I said, you both look as if you just left your cave to go on the hunt. By the way, my real name is Kathy, Kathy Miller, but you can still call me Pris. It's short for 'Prissy,' a nickname I picked up in college."

John stepped between the two of them. He fought a surge of irritation as he stepped back and finally broke contact.

"A nice, soft cave would be mighty welcome," John said, clapping one hand on his shoulder. "And the only food we'll be hunting up is from 'Ptomaine Terrace' here."

"If you're on your break I shouldn't be taking your time." She turned to him once again and held her hand out. "It was very nice meeting you, Alec."

"And I'm glad to finally get to meet you." Reluctantly he let her go once more and watched as she turned to leave. She took two strides before he blurted out: "I hope we'll get together again soon."

She stopped and turned, a smile already on her lips. "Count on it." She then turned again, and was gone....

"... Didn't you tell me you knew?..." Grey stopped himself, looking up at the acoustic tiles in confusion. The soft whirring sound came to him, and he remembered where he was. Still, he could feel it rising like the heat of a warm spring day. He closed his eyes, savoring it as he had then.

The voice once more intruded. He tried to shut it out, to hold on to the vision of that moment. Even so, the image faded, slipping through the fingers of his mind like sand washed by the sea.

"Yes? I'm sorry, could you repeat that, please?"

"I was making a comment that there was a great deal of anticipation in that meeting for you. That could be a key to your current problem. Now then, I want you to recall the first time the two of you did anything together. Your first date, if you feel that label is appropriate."

Easy. The ocean park. She loved the outdoors, and being among living things. She especially loved the mountains, but the sea was a close second. He chuckled to himself. He didn't know how much she would love sea creatures now, after what had happened that day.... (*Whirr.*)

"... Oh my God ..." she screamed as she tried to duck beneath the stream of water erupting from the mouth of the trained walrus. She cringed in his lap as one mouthful after another geysered from the blubbering animal.

"This is disgusting." She sat there in the growing puddle. Her arms were held out from her sides, displaying the completely drenched material of her baggy cotton shirt and jeans. Although she was scowling, he could see the laughter in her eyes.

"You are definitely on the damp side." He nodded his head and kept a straight face. "Decidedly damp I would say."

"Thank you for your brilliant observation." She shook her arms and tried to wring out the excess water.

"They did say we might get wet sitting here." The

trained seals finished taking their bow, and the crowd started to filter out. "It was one of the first things they said, if I remember."

"Might get wet, they said. One of the seals jumping from a platform, splashing us, something like that. Not have some fat old walrus...."

"He didn't seem that old...."

"Come waddling out to the front...."

"Actually I think he rolled more than waddled...."

"And spit all over me."

"Probably the only trick he knows."

"I wouldn't be surprised." She stopped and looked up at him, another grimace crossing her face. "Oh, this is really gross."

"What?"

"I just realized that I'm covered with walrus saliva...."

Now he made a face. "Right after he ate that huge bucket of fish, too."

"Oooohhh, yuck!" She started to squirm, moans of revulsion mixing with her familiar giggle.

"It's okay." He put his arm around her shoulder and pulled himself into her puddle. "I like my women damp."

"Oh, really?" she said with a side-long look. "And covered with walrus spit?"

"Only way to have them...."

"With bits of pre-digested herring in their hair?"

"Never have to go out for lunch again."

She made a gagging face at him. "You're sick." She followed it up with a quick peck on his lips. As they stood to leave, she stepped back and examined him intently.

"Hey, you're almost completely dry. How did you manage that?"

"It's easy. When that walrus started to spray everybody, and you squirmed on top of me to get out of the way...."

"Yeah?"

"Well, I just hid behind you ... hey, wait, don't, okay. I'm sorry, I'll buy you a towel ... a dozen towels...." He fended off her attempts to pinch and tickle him. Finally when nothing else seemed to work he grabbed her and pulled her close. Her struggles ceased immediately as she wrapped her arms around his waist.

"Oh, God," she said softly, a quiet whine in her voice. "I'm all wet."

"Decidedly damp."

"Damp," she agreed, kissing the base of his throat.

"Don't worry about it. Like I said, I like you damp." They shared another laugh as they stood there, wrapped about each other....

Grey sat there, listening to the laughter. He wondered at it, then realized that it was coming from him. He self-consciously worked to stifle the sound.

"It was a good moment, Mr. Grey?"

"Oh, yes. Definitely." They had spent the entire day there. Even purchased bathing suits so they could swim through the "Water Playground," a large man-made island crossed by ponds, lakes, channels, slides ... a person could travel from one end to the other without ever needing to step from the water.

Grey fell silent and very still. His gaze pierced the ceiling above him. He remembered how strong a swimmer she was. And he remembered....

"You're thinking about another moment." The voice



came to him again. "Something about that last recollection reminded you of something else." More whirring sounds. "With a very strong reaction associated as well."

Grey nodded. That time up in the mountains. Hiking all day long. And the cold, clear pond they came across.

"I think it merits some exploration." Even as the voice was speaking, Grey's vision whirred once again....

... "Where did that come from?" Long. Irregular. White against the deep brown of her thigh. A brown that ran undiminished as it continued up and over her hips, waist, stomach, and breasts.

Her hand touched the scar he had noticed. "Oh, I did that. Years ago. When I was little." She continued to wade into the water.

He followed. Chill. Giving way to deeply cool. Partly embarrassed, mostly thankful as the water covered up his nakedness. Waist-deep now. Trying to act as nonchalant as she. "How? An accident?" His breath caught as she went under, to come up suddenly, water streaming from her, long flowing strands slicked back, wet and glistening.

"My little brother found this razor out of my dad's tool box." She swam backwards, lazily. He sighed heavily as the rising heat within contended with the lapping cool without. "I took it away from him just as I heard my dad coming into the garage. I didn't want Timmy to get into trouble, so I tried to hide the thing behind my back. Unfortunately my leg got in the way." She raised her leg into the air, bring the white scar once more into view.

He pushed toward her. His hand reached out. He gently traced the line of the long-gone injury with his finger. "A martyred heroine. That's what you are." The words forced. God, but she was soft. His head was light and his vision glazed.

She looked at him. Quiet. Serious. Then something came on in her eyes. He sputtered as she heaved a wall of water into his face.

He blinked. Cleared his eyes. Saw her swimming strongly across the water. Laughter came to his ears. He pushed off after her.

One stroke. Two. Three. He caught her halfway through four. Tussle. Slick and slippery. No purchase. Breathing became heavier with exertion. Then heavier still.

His senses overloaded. Warm wrapped in cool, then warm again. Without thought, beyond instinct, he followed the warm.

"Slowly ... slowly." He heard the words as he drank deep of what he found....

His breath came in ragged gasps as he held himself tight about his chest. He squeezed himself tighter with each passing second.

"Don't worry, Mr. Grey. We are almost ready to conclude our session for today...."

"No."

There was silence for a long moment. "Is something the matter?"

"No." Grey took in a full lungful of air, then straightened himself out. "Nothing is wrong. I just don't want to continue. I don't want to 'conclude' anything today. That's all."

"Do you think that is wise?" The whirring sound was going crazy now, like an angry wasp trapped in a jar.

"After all, you don't want to spend the rest of your life in your current state of mind."

"I don't care." The voice was always so assured, so full of professional concern. It left Grey feeling like some sort of barbarian, calling for a witch doctor in the middle of a modern hospital. "I just don't want to go through with it. That's all."

"There's another matter to all this, one I think you should consider."

Grey thought for a moment before answering. "What's that?"

"The cost to yourself. Just as the momentum from these events can lead you to moments which you find pleasant, they can also lead you to others far more negative."

Grey looked at the ceiling, trying not to understand.

"For example," the voice continued, "you will be forced to try to reconcile events which brought the relationship to an end. And there are always scenes which can never be brought to term — the last time you saw her, for example."

Even as he remembered, he whirred once more....

He sat down and faced her. He had picked her up at work, waiting in the lobby.

"You've had dinner?" Her voice was quiet, soft, exceptionally polite. "You want anything to eat?"

"No, I'm fine." He shook his head. The restaurant was one of those all-night places. It was late, just past the dinner rush. People coming in now were stopping by after going somewhere else. A sort of temporary resting place before making the final push for home. It seemed appropriate. "I'll just have something to drink."

She nodded her head. They said nothing until after the waitress returned with the hot tea they both had ordered.

"I suppose there is little point in beating around the bush." He squeezed the lemon into his cup. "Things haven't been going well between us for some time now, and I think we ought to talk about it." He looked up while stirring to see her nodding thoughtfully.

"The way I see it is this." He stopped, not entirely sure what he was going to say. He just knew he needed to say something, keep filling the air with words in the hope that something, some combination, would give him the answer he desired. "It seems to me that you are feeling ... well, I don't want to put words in your mouth, but from what you told me, I guess it's safe to assume that you're feeling somewhat stifled...."

"Alec...."

"Now I just want you to know that was never my intention...." He went on quickly. There was an answer, there always had to be. With every problem, there was a solution. When a program wasn't going right, you went slowly and carefully until you got the bugs out. "I understand now what I was doing wrong before...."

"You never did anything wrong...."

"If that's the case, then what are we doing here talking like this?" He quickly took a sip of his tea, burning his lip. He took no heed of it as he continued to speak before she had a chance to answer. "I just want you to know that I am taking steps to change my behavior. I have to learn to be more secure with myself."

"I don't want you to change for me...."

"But you see, I'm not changing for you. I'm doing this for myself. Obviously, if it makes a difference in our

relationship, that's great. But I'm still going to try and ... well, basically grow up. As a matter of fact, I made a very important step in that direction today...."

"Alec, please!" She reached out and stilled his hands. He hadn't realized they were trembling until she touched them. Small bronze-colored drops from his cup sparkled on his thumb and fingers. "That has nothing to do with it. You have been, in all honesty, the sweetest, most considerate man I have ever been with. If there was a right way to go about making a woman feel good, you could write a book on it."

He looked into her eyes, saying nothing, and waited.

Just before it finally came she pulled away and sat back in her chair. "If anything, the problem is with me. I keep telling myself, 'Just be patient. It will come to you. Just reach out and grab him, time will take care of the rest.' I've thought that, eventually, I would feel as strongly about you as you do about me." She paused, looking at him. Her lips parted, the breath ready, but stalled, unwilling.

"But now —" He stopped and cleared his throat, which had constricted on the words it found there. "But now you don't think that will ever happen?" He let it hang there, hoping that somehow, perhaps on the smoky updraft of an all-night coffee shop, it would float away and out into the night.

Instead, she nodded her head, and it sat there, as hard and as substantial as the table between them. "That's exactly what I think. Part of me keeps saying that I'll wake up one day and regret this moment for the rest of my life. But I have to go with how I feel, and right now I feel as if I'm leading you on, pretending something that isn't true." She looked down in her half-empty cup. "I care for you too much to do that to you."

There was a long pause as he looked past her shoulder, not seeing anything, and she examined the softly marred surface of the table. There ought to be a rule book for all this, he thought, some sort of manual that would help you learn the system. Make this whole process more user-friendly.

Finally he sighed. "I guess all that's left is for one of us to say it."

She looked up and remained silent.

"I suppose that we are officially dissolved as a 'couple,' romantically speaking, that is."

She nodded, a small and sad smile sitting silently on her lips.

He nodded, his mouth pursed together. He shrugged his shoulders, hands held out. "Oh, well...."

"God, I really think you're special." She smiled fully now, sitting up to face him again. "I know this may sound selfish, but I want you to be a part of my life. I've never met anyone who I could talk with the way I talk with you." She started to reach her hands out to him once more. "I was hoping that we could still be friends...."

Just as she touched him, his leaned back in his seat, bringing the napkin up to his face. He coughed once, then twice, and placed the crumpled white paper beside his cup. It was almost, but not quite, enough to hide the fact that he had jerked away when she touched him, recoiling from the words she spoke.

Pause. "I guess I'd better take you back to your car."

"You don't have to do that," she said. "It's near enough. I can walk."

"That's okay, it's right along my way."

"No, you really don't have to...."

"Yes." He said it with finality. "I do."

"Okay." Her voice was quiet, soft, as if it were the last sound ever to be heard....

Do you want me to stop the procedure, Mr. Grey?"

He stared up at the ceiling. He tried to bring it into focus and found he could not. Reaching up, he felt a wetness on his face.

He heard something snap open close by. Feeling the arm of the chair, he found a panel which had lifted to reveal something soft and yielding to his touch. He pulled one of the tissues out and used it to wipe the tears from his eyes.

"Do you still wish to discontinue therapy, Mr. Grey? Now is the time to decide."

Grey let the sound of the voice wash over him. He wondered if he cared what happened anymore.

"If I may make an analogy from your own profession, what we are doing is similar to debugging an errant program. Removing everything which compromises the efficient operation of the application."

Grey thought of swimming. Of coolness. And water splashing. And of small bronze-colored drops resting on his hand.

"Some people decide not to complete the session. However, when one examines their reasoning, one finds it based on concepts of fulfillment and growth which are ill-conceived at best. Definitely from eras that did not have our therapeutic advantages."

Grey looked up, turning his chair around. He watched the display terminal of the unit. It had apparently finished its final editing check and was waiting for his decision. Grey was the only person in the room, and part of him wondered if someone else were there, whether it would make a difference.

"Do you wish to discontinue the session, Mr. Grey? I need an answer, please."

"No." He leaned back, looking at the ceiling once more. "Go ahead and finish."

"I think that is the best decision, Mr. Grey." The voice came to him from the voice-synthesizer module. "You will function better for it."

"By the way," Grey said, glancing down once more. "Those people you mentioned, the ones that don't finish, whatever happens to them?"

"I don't know." A green light came on just below the terminal. The screen quickly flashed, "Ready," and Grey felt the whirr. "None of them ever return."

One last set of questions, Mr. Grey."

Grey jumped, then forced himself to relax. It had been silent for some time. He had answered a series of post-therapy questions. Standard stuff. Grey looked at the processor and frowned. He distinctly remembered facing the other way when he sat down, with his back to the unit. But when he came to ... he shrugged it off. It wasn't important.

"Now then, are you familiar with a person named Kathy Miller?"

Grey thought for a while. "Oh, yeah. She's this girl that works at the same place I do, down in development." He hadn't thought of her for quite some time.

"Didn't you have a relationship with her?"

His eyebrows rose at the idea. "I'd hardly call it a relationship. We went out a few times, every other month or so. Went to bed a couple of times. Nothing special."

The whirring sound came to his ears. "So you hold her in no special regard? Nothing bothers you about the way the two of you broke up?"

"We didn't 'break up,' we just ... stopped seeing each other." He let out a breath of air, irritated at the machine for wasting his time on something so trivial. "Actually she seemed to take the whole thing more seriously than I did. She really wasn't for me. Too much the 'woodsy type' — climbing rocks, swimming, stuff like that." He still had that stupid pair of swimming trunks from the ocean park. Boring day. He still got a chuckle, though, when he thought about how she got blasted by that walrus.

"Did you ever go swimming with her, Mr. Grey?"

Grey started again, then reached to make sure he was completely disconnected. "Yeah, once. When we went to the ocean park together."

"And that was the only time?"

Grey thought a moment, then nodded. "Yeah, that was it."

Whirr, then a click. "Well, we're through for the day, and you are free to leave."

He found himself strangely at a loss for a moment, then quickly sat up straight. "Oh. OK. Good. So everything is ... fine, then?"

"Of course. Just making sure that we are in as good

health mentally as we are physically."

Grey nodded, feeling somewhat relieved. "Good. Then I won't see you until my next appointment." He chuckled nervously, running his fingers through his hair. "For the life of me I can't remember when that is."

"Not a problem." It quickly printed out a reminder notice, with the time and date he was scheduled to return. "I hope this fits in with your schedule."

He glanced at the paper. "Oh, yeah. This will be perfect." He questioned the intelligence of the device. It had his entire schedule stored in its database; it knew what would fit his schedule and what wouldn't. One of these days, he told himself, I ought to come right out and tell it what I actually think. For some reason it always slipped his mind.

He stepped out into the afternoon sun, looking at his watch. The session had taken less time than he had expected. He could still make it back to work and put in a few more hours.

As he went to activate the lock to his car, he discovered something soft and yielding in his pocket. Pulling it out he found a soft, white tissue napkin. It was slightly damp and stained with moisture.

He looked at it, perplexed as to where he had picked it up, then, with a shrug, he tossed it out the window. As he pulled out of the parking lot, the paper danced and curled in the breeze of his passing. As he had no need for it, he didn't give it a single thought. □

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Russian Roulette

By Phillip C. Jennings

Art by Lori Deitrick

Candy was fat, fat, obscenely fat. Her thighs clobbered each other as she tried to walk from the transfer room. Her belly hung down over her groin, a huge flaccidity that bounced so much that she joked: "I don't need a girdle, I need a wheelbarrow!"

Her hips were deformed, hummocks port and starboard. If she were a ship they'd be outriggers. They crippled her — she could sit in no ordinary chair, she had to go sideways through the two or three doors that circumscribed her present life.

The other women of the Slim-esthenics Club helped her to her table, and pulled out her special bench for her. "What would you like?" Brenda asked, trim and wiry in her tank top and aerobics tights.

Candy caught her breath. It had been weeks since her last food orgy, weeks of raw lettuce, Perrier water, jogging. Weeks spent fantasizing about fried chicken, spaghetti in garlic-butter sauce and Black Forest tortes; weeks inside the slender dark-haired body now rolling the dessert tray into the room.

She'd more than done her duty; the habitus she'd turned over to Angie weighed in at one-oh-three. Now it was time for her reward. Demands tumbled out of her: french fries, breaded shrimp, a chocolate malt, coke, Texas toast, and onion rings. She only had two days in this body, then it was back to beauty and discipline. Two days of festive gluttony.

Bernie could live without her for two days. Then it was Diana's turn to eat, and Candy would come home in Diana's castoff habitus, one of his favorites. The husbands of the Slim-esthenics social circle had nothing to complain about, with their wives cycling through a succession of lovely trim bodies. For Bernie two nights alone was a small price to pay; the high point of his month was the day after tomorrow.

Candy looked in liplicking glee as the first steaming basket of fries was set in front of her. She tilted forward, reached, and brought it to her mouth for easier shoveling. For her, the high point was now. Her heart beat fast, her face flushed red. At her side Brenda sighed with envy — and Candy began to eat.

Three hours and six courses later, on the verge of explosion, she took a break. A couch lay by the window overlooking the tennis court. Music played outside, where Brenda led the others through Saturday afternoon exercises — only Samantha stayed at Candy's side, to pat the sweat from her face and remove the empty plates.

With Samantha's help Candy tried to stand, failed, and tried again, then shambled to that place in the window's sun, almost collapsing into the cushions and reinforced springs. "Give me a gin and tonic," she gasped. "I want to get tiddly, so make it strong. Make a pitcher." She eyed the bowl of salted peanuts, too exhausted to roll forward and reach it. Samantha grinned, picking it up to lay it on the broad shelf of Candy's belly.

A minute later Candy glugged her first drink. "I wonder what I weigh?" she said, prodding a breast to make it jiggle. "It's about time the Slim-esthenics Club got a wheelchair, don't you think? This body's really beyond walking any more."

Music drifted up from the tennis court, background to a strenuous chant: "One and two and one and two ..." Samantha shook her head. "Do they make wheelchairs that wide? Anyhow, the club blew this quarter's budget on the hot tub. Would you like to get in? Those clothes look uncomfortably tight."

"They are," Candy agreed. "Angie really pigged out during her turn. Take 'em off and I doubt I'll get them on again. I'll have to live in a bathrobe. Ah, what the fuck."

Ordinarily Candy didn't swear, but in this obscene body she told raunchy tales about male endowments, jokes about Irishmen and blacks and Japanese. As Samantha began to unsnap and unzip, and she exploded into striated, cellulitic, varicose-veined nudity, Candy tried to remember through the fog of her second gin and tonic, to contemplate the irony — of all the fourteen bodies in the Slim-esthenics inventory, this was the most nearly virginal, with the least right to repeat vulgar stories.

Fourteen bodies, fourteen souls. She chuckled an oily chuckle, full of resonance and juice. Here was an idea: What if the memory transfer helmet broke down, and she was stuck in this monstrous flesh until the thing got repaired? She'd go home to Bernie — imagine his surprise! Imagine the drop of his jaw! But no, even supposing she could squeeze into a car, it was against the Slim-esthenics contract for her to endanger this habitus by exposing it to the stresses of normal life. Suppose she had a heart attack? Brenda was a lawyer: she'd actually mulled on the possibility that by contributing to this singular grotesque obesity, the thirteen surviving women might be charged with — manslaughter?

"Time to get up again," Samantha said cheerily, wickedly, knowing from her stint six days ago just what tortures Candy was about to endure; the labor of tottering to the door, making that sideways squeeze through, spending her reserves of strength in another twenty-foot bare-assed waddle across the clubhouse balcony to the hot tub, hearing the timbers creak beneath her unseen feet.

It would be easier if she weren't so tipsy, if her stomach were less overfull. Candy felt appallingly lightheaded as she grunted, pushed and winched up onto her feet. The room's periphery darkened, day turned to night; she suffered a spell of tunnel vision as tides of blood rushed to a new configuration. Her heart pounded. Urgent to get this over with, she stepped, grantly quaking, stepped again, flailed out her arms . . .

She was unconscious when she crashed to the floor, dead before Samantha's screams interrupted the workout on the tennis court.

Damn you — put that phone down!" Brenda's voice of command made Angie pause. "We've got to call 911," she answered breathlessly.

"The hell we do. Get hold of Helen first. Then call the other members in. We've got an emergency meeting here. Who else isn't present? Suki? Jeanne? Tell them they've got to come right away, no matter what."

"What about — the corpse?" Angie shivered; she could barely control the shaking of her hands enough to set the handpiece back in its cradle.

"Diggings good for the shoulders," Brenda answered. "Let's find some shovels and get on with it. There's space along the fence behind that lilac bush. Samantha, cut that shrieking. You want to get us in the newspapers? You want the world to go through our closets? Christ! I tell you, the district attorney's just primed to find a test case — memory



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transfer equipment has opened up a legal can of worms, and he wants to get famous by putting the lid back on. As far as I'm concerned he can find some other victims."

As she spoke a tall, large-boned woman entered the room. Helen belonged on some Stalinesque pedestal. Her present heroic-Soviet-motherland body had been Angie's to begin with; nothing to write home about, almost impossible to beat into hundred-thirty-pound shape. "You heard about Candy?" Brenda asked. "You heard that she died?"

"Oh, God." Helen's face went pale as she saw the body. She slumped back against the wall.

"Had to happen sometime. You're an old friend. You know her husband Bernie, as well as anyone, and you're not married. Think you can pull it off?"

"Me?" Helen woke from her brief trance. "— What are you saying? He'll know, he's gonna find out. He'll reminisce about some cruise I don't know anything about, or some romantic anniversary —"

"You overestimate the male sex," Brenda interrupted. "You underestimate yourself. It'll get comfortable after a few weeks. You could do worse. What kind of man are you finding in the singles bars anyhow?"

Helen shook her head. "You, a lawyer — I don't believe you're saying these things! Fraud — Candy —"

"I know my priorities. You didn't think ahead, did you?" Brenda asked. "Hell, anybody could see what was going to happen. Last time I was in that mound of lard I didn't know if I'd make it out alive — had to sleep tilted just because of all that breast-weight on my lungs! So afterward I did some contingency planning, the way a club president ought to do. Thirteen of us now, so we just cycle a little faster. I'll get the

computer to print out a new schedule. No problems, except for Bernie, and getting rid of this quarter-ton corpse. Come on now, buck up, everybody! Nobody has to know. Things could be worse."

Helen shivered, clutching herself as she tottered to where Candy lay face down. She reached, then pulled back, not daring to touch. "I hardly feel real any more," she whispered. "I grew up in that sad flesh, kids teasing me ... oh Candy, forgive me for thinking about myself!" With a sob she turned away. "Now I'm a soul adrift. What's the law say? Lord, what if I don't legally exist?"

"An interesting question. We don't want to find out, so settle down. Play along with me here. Take a deep breath. Here's the scenario: day after tomorrow Diana comes in and you make the trade —"

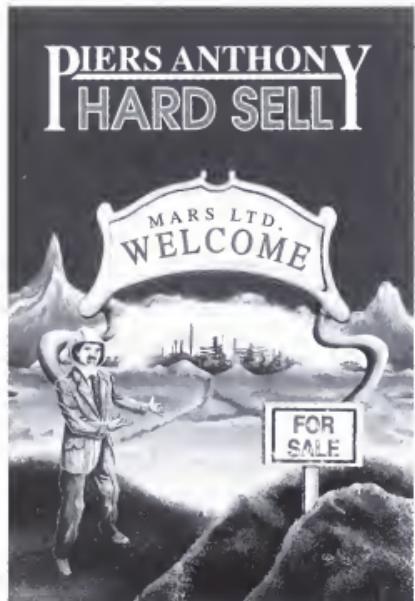
"And what do I do till then?" Helen asked.

Brenda waved peremptorily. Angie, Samantha and the others bent to drag Candy's body across the room. "Get a tarp," she told them, and turned back to face Helen again. "Well, there's lots of food lying around, isn't there? We're going to need a new — uh, a new —"

Helen looked at Candy, then down at herself. "I suppose this habitus will hold out a while. Five years of gluttony before our game turns into another Russian roulette. It's nothing special to look at, another glamorous throwaway"

Fighting back her tears, she took up Candy's pitcher and poured herself a gin and tonic. "I'll need to make some phone calls. Close down my old life. Quit the old job."

"That's the spirit," Brenda said, smiling. She gave Helen a pat on the back. "It'll all work out. Here, have a torte. Eat up, it's on the house." □



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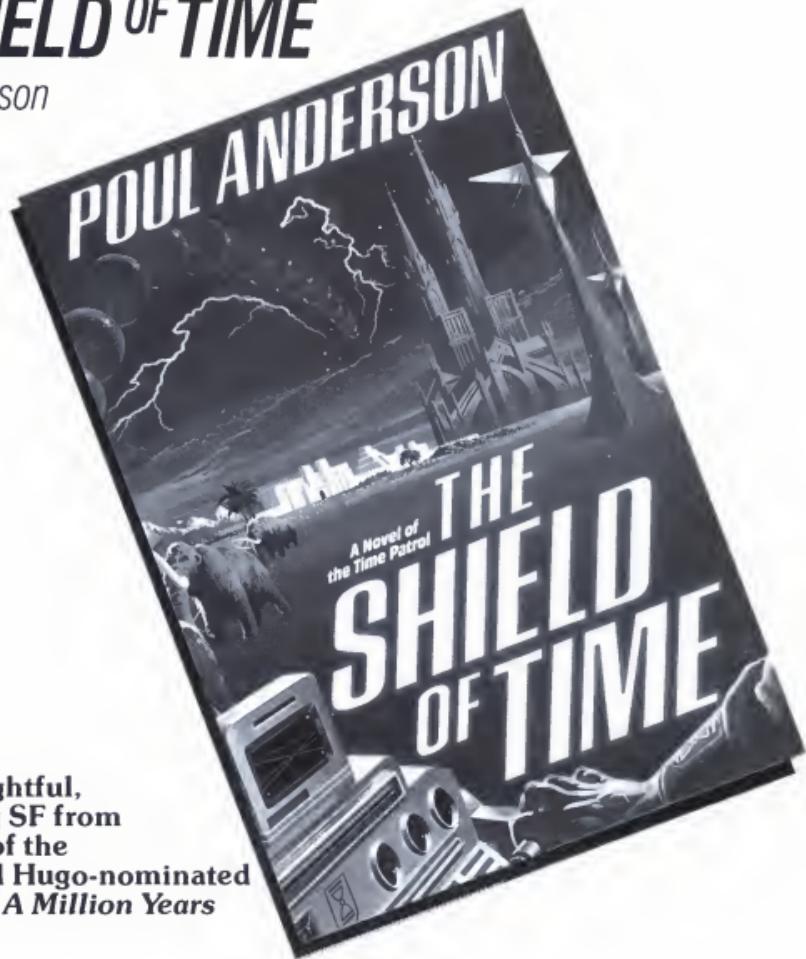
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